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January 2004

Another year is gone, and here we are in January. It's been a great year here at Deep Magic. We've published our first novel in paperback, as well as an Anthology. Our subscriptions keep increasing, and we continue to hear great things from our readers. This next year should be even better. We have several novels in the works, another Anthology, and of course, our monthly issues. So we thank you all for your support this past year, and we hope you will continue to join us in 2004.

We're kicking off the new year with a great group of stories. *A Hero By Any Other Name* tells that even Goblins deserve some recognition. *Limbo the Black-Souled* explores the pros and cons of fighting for good and evil. Next comes *A Spark of Life*, sequel to *A Taste of Earth* from an earlier issue of Deep Magic. Will the earth be terraformed, destroying all life, or is there something worth saving here? Finally, explore a fascinating new world of fantasy in *All the Right Reasons*.

We also feature artwork and an interview with cover artist Robin Wood and an article by Fantasy author Cecilia Dart-Thornton. And if you look closely enough, you'll find some information in here about her newest release, *The Battle of Evernight*, the final chapter in her *Bitterbynde* trilogy.

Don't forget to check out the writing challenges submitted this past month. We had more submissions than we've ever had, and as much as we'd love to publish them all, we just couldn't. But we've included enough to keep you reading for a little while, at least. We'd like to thank all those who submitted to the challenge and encourage everyone to try again this month.

As a final note, we have made some changes to our submission guidelines. Due to the volume of submissions we now receive, it's time to update how we receive your stories. So check out the guidelines before your next submission.

Sit back, relax, and enjoy the January issue of Deep Magic. And look for some great additions in the coming months.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

January 2004 Writing Challenge

For the writing challenge this month, let's try something in line with the time of year. It's the New Year, and many of us take this time to make resolutions. Maybe it's something we want to change, or something we want to do for the first time.

The challenge for this month is to take a character of your creation and give him or her a new resolution. Decide what that resolution will be (a change, a new adventure, etc.) and write a scene that explores this desire for change. Convince us why your character takes on this resolution, and do it in 1000 words or less.

Selections from the December 2003 Writing Challenge

Bitter Chivalry
Bitter Storm
Bitter Chivalry
The King's Best Soldier
Immortal Quest
Cursed Swords

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

If a picture is worth a thousand words, this month's cover by Todd Lockwood must be worth twice that. Todd is an expert at filling his paintings with emotion, and this cover image, Bitter Chivalry, is an excellent example.

Sometimes a picture can inspire an author creatively. We think this painting should be no exception. So this month's challenge is to write a scene or short story about this month's cover image. You can start with this scene, end with it, or let it be a passing moment in your story. Regardless, try to bring out the emotion of the piece.

And, to prove the old saying, keep it to 1000 words or less.

Bitter Chivalry

by Shannon McNear

The battle was over, and the king lay dying. Daymonde waited in the shadows of the pavilion's inner chamber while the physician examined King Glenfidditch of Nyland, shook his head, and made the king as comfortable as he could. They dared not even remove the arrows from the king's body, for fear it would hasten his death.

With bowed heads, the physician and his assistant slipped out, leaving Daymonde, the King's Champion, alone with his beloved monarch.

"My son—" Glenfidditch's gasping broke the silence inside the tent— "my son, where are you?"

"Here, M'lord," Daymonde said, stepping forward to kneel beside the king's pallet.

His face was grey in the flickering candlelight. Silver glimmered in the long red hair and full beard. Pale blue eyes searched for Daymonde's as the king's hand groped toward him. Daymonde hid a wince, and clasped Glenfidditch's hand in his own.

"My son," the king said again. "Ever have I honored you as if you were my own."

"Aye, M'lord."

Glenfidditch took a breath, coughed, spoke again with a wheeze. "Take care of my kingdom."

"I will – do my best, M'lord." Daymonde cleared his throat, sought to forestall the charge he knew would come if he held his silence. "I will see that Fiona weds well."

The reddish mane waved as the king's head tossed restlessly. "Nay – you. I want her to wed – you."

Dismay contracted Daymonde's insides as the wish he had seen lurking in the king's thoughts for weeks became spoken word. The Pit take this cursed war, and those who had begun it – this was not supposed to happen. Glenfidditch should have survived long enough to wed again himself and produce a male heir.

Daymonde fumbled for the words. Admonitions from the Book of the Law, embedded in his consciousness since boyhood, surfaced now. … *and yet not to rule you himself, for that would be too great a burden* … He wondered how to reconcile his desire to please his King with obedience to a higher directive.

"I need – your assurance, my son."

He bent his head to Glenfidditch's shoulder. "M'lord … you ask me to transgress the Law."

"Do I?" The King's voice was suddenly stronger. "I know nothing that says a man of the Gift may not serve his sovereign by providing heirs to the throne." He paused for breath. "Unless Fiona herself distresses you? She is young, but will grow …"

Daymonde squeezed his eyes against the memory of the slight girl, hardly more than a child, with her father's abundant auburn hair and pale eyes. His stomach twisted anew at the thought of the girl's awe and adulation in his presence. Not that she was any worse than anyone else—

He took a deep breath. Ach – the mingled blessing and curse of the Gift in being able to see through others, to know the depths of virtue – and vice. Many an eye-pleasing lass had a heart as black as night, while some who might never draw a second glance were full of unseen

light. Daymonde searched far and wide for one who was lovely both inside and out, for it was his duty to wed sooner or later, to insure the continuation of the Gift—

"My son!" The King's voice grew desperate.

Daymonde lifted his head. How could he refuse Glenfidditch, whom he had sworn to serve with his very life? Mayhap the Stranger would be merciful in granting him contentment at least with Fiona – and after all, the Law did not explicitly prohibit a man of the Gift from wedding a princess.

"Aye," he said. "I will serve you in this."

Glenfidditch's long sigh caused Daymonde's heart to leap in fear that the king had gone already; but after a moment the older man stirred. "Fetch my captains. Prepare a last cup, and you will share it with me to signify the covenant you make."

The King's word was carried out. A dozen strong men of Nyland, cloaks still wrapped about them from the bitter cold, clad in armor and maille, filed into the pavilion and stood around the bed as witnesses. Daymonde held his longsword unsheathed as he vowed to fulfill Glenfidditch's last request. The King's jeweled gold chalice was filled with the best Gemanan wine. Propped in the arms of his two head captains, Glenfidditch drank, and then Daymonde.

The King held his gaze. "Keep her honor well."

With a rattling breath, his spirit fled.

* * *

Daymonde stumbled out of the pavilion, into the ankle-deep snow and driving wind, past the rows of tents till he stood near the rim of the glen where they made camp. He grieved not only the loss of a good and kind king, one who had been as a father to him since the passing of his own – but with the decision past, a fresh horror gripped him. All his life, he had been told the place of the Gift was to serve – never to hold a position of authority – the temptation of power was too great even for those most disciplined in the precepts of the Law. The King's desperate plea did not dispel Daymonde's conviction that he had done something very wrong. It was more than the disappointment of surrendering his dreams of marrying for love. The weight of the Law itself pressed upon him, condemning him for being so easily swayed.

He looked at the chalice still clutched in his left hand, the sword bared in his right. With numb fingers, he tipped the cup, spilling the last drops into the snow; then with a soft gasp, dropped the chalice and staggered forward a few steps.

Unmindful of his billowing cloak and the chill penetrating his clothing and armor, he stared unseeing into the evergreens. At last he bowed his head and stood till the swirling flakes half covered his boots and softened the prints behind him, while the tears formed rivers of ice on his cheeks.

Bitter Storm

by L. S. King

The drums beat slowly as the family left the crypt. Dead, Alcandhor thought as the wind and snow whipped about his face. His father was truly dead.

The final mourning ceremony had been delayed to give time for his elder brother, Haldhor, to arrive from his remote bounds in the mountains.

But he had not come.

Not even for his own father's funeral would he leave his bounds. Intractable. As always.

Haldhor had refused the mantle of Thaneship, so now Alcandhor was Thane, or ruler, of their clan. Thane of the peacekeeping Rangers.

The drums stopped and Alcandhor turned to face the crypt, as did all his kin. Two Rangers shut the doors, bowed, and backed away, as a final sign of respect to their dead Thane.

Alcandhor's throat tightened, but he stood as stone. His father had known he would die young. The blood of the alien race that had befriended them centuries ago was strong in him. He had many gifts, including prescience. Alcandhor cursed that foresight. Cursed that his father had known of his death, and warned his family. Cursed that he accepted that fate with such calm.

"Come," urged his uncle, pulling on his shoulder. Alcandhor shook his head, staring at the crypt. Kin filed past, but he saw them not.

His oldest son came and took his hand, tears in his eyes as he looked up. Alcandhor put a hand to the young boy's cheek. At least he was old enough to remember his grandfather. His other two children were too young; they would not know the quick wit, the broad grin, the piercing blue eyes, the wisdom of their grandfather. They would not remember him holding them with such pride and love, playing games with them on the rug in front of the hearth. They would not grow up learning from him, watching him as Thane, seeing the ideals of their clan embodied in such a wonderful example.

But even his oldest would not remember much. Would he remember his grandfather showing him how to hold a knife as he started Ranger Training, and how proud the Thane was as he gave the boy his first sharpened one for his own when he had proven himself with a blade? Would he remember his grandfather's strong hands as the taught him to grip a sword, or sitting with him, reading to him?

Alcandhor patted his son's shoulder, then nodded that he should follow his cousins. "Go on."

"Papa?"

"I will be along. I just need...time alone."

Alcandhor's long hair lashed about his face and the snow stung and smarted, as he waited for them all to leave.

Last to go was his sister. She put her arms around him, but had the storm turned him into ice? There was no balm, no solace in their shared grief. She let him go and turned to walk back home.

Was life more than the bitterness that seemed to fill him with one blow after another? His life's dream to study to be a lawkeeper died when his brother renounced heirship to Thane and dropped that weight on Alcandhor's shoulders.

"I wanted not that burden, Father," he whispered. "I wanted not to be Thane. Who do I turn to, now?" Anger rose like hot bile in his throat. "Why did you have to die? 'Twas not your time! You were still young and hale. You have grandchildren to watch grow. Do you not see how your clan mourns you?" His voice cracked and he continued even softer. "And your son mourns you? Could you not have fought the foresight? Could you not have lived?"

Alcandhor inhaled with deliberate slowness, letting the icy air fill his lungs. The anger froze, like brittle ice it cracked and splintered into shards and fell into the snow.

He walked closer and set a hand on the snow-covered stone of the crypt, barely noticing the sharp, fiery pins of ice that shot into his skin from the contact.

Cold. Alone. That was the future.

"How do I say good-bye?" he muttered. "How do I take up life without you? How do I take up Thaneship? 'Tis doubly bitter losing you, Father."

His father's face swam before him, a loving, yet chastising expression set on it.

Alcandhor knew what he had to do. With another long inhale, he drew his sword and held it in a high salute. But his arm fell as his resolve faltered and he turned away, his shoulders bowed, the sword dragging in the snow. "I want not to say good-bye. Or take this cup of leadership." But he knew he would take it. He must.

The storm raged on about him.

Bitter Chivalry

By Steve Poling

I was a page when I saw her looking out the kitchen window. She smiled. It was a nice smile. It stayed with me for the rest of my service to Sir Charles. All that time I obsessed over her. Yet I never dared approach her. Thereafter I lived for any crumb of attention she'd pay me. Every tournament I fought was for her. If she noticed, I never knew it.

I fought beside Sir Charles in the Crusade. He trained me well and when he fell, it was my sword that avenged him. When the Saracens captured Lord Stanley I led the rescue party. I returned with honor as a Knight.

But she had changed and so had I. She cared only for her art and poetry. I cared only for my honor and glory. She married Lord Stanley the summer I married Lady Julia. I forgot that smile and found love with my Julia. When my elder brother died in the plague, I became a Lord myself.

When the Danes attacked we were safe within the walls of Castle Duchesne. When they took the Abbey, they took her captive with the Abbey's gold.

The weight of their spoils was the Danes' undoing. My men caught them on the beach after two days' march. Their pilot fell with half their number in my archers' first volley.

I led the charge against the berserkers. They fought like madmen, their eyes red with rage. I understand, for when I really fight I see through the red mist of Mars. My blade and arm become one—a flesh and steel pendulum of death. Sand and surf drank deep of Danish blood that day. My pride in my men knew no bounds.

Disaster struck when we took the ship. We saved the captives unhurt. Her son is a smart lad who favors his father. Oh Dear God, why couldn't she be fat or pock-scarred? She looks exactly as I remember save that streaks of silver flash through raven tresses. That same smile.

I took her back to Castle Duchesne where Lady Julia entertains her now awaiting Lord Stanley. My children love the lad—as I love him for her sake. There is nothing I can do. Nothing I should do. Nothing I want to do. But ache.

The King's Best Soldier

by Susan Brassfield Cogan

Two days after Christmas, Beric saw Danzia, the most famous of all the Dakhanni, standing in the snow, thin as a blade. Hard as steel. He saw her because she allowed him a glimpse of her.

His village lay only a little further. Safety and warmth would be there--his wife, his mother, his children. But the village might as well be in a valley on the moon. Death stalked him in the snow.

Beric unloaded his pack of everything but a few bits of food. The heaviest thing was the gold cup that had belonged to King Godfrey. "You are my best soldier," the king had once said in front of the assembled court and gifted the cup to him. He had always been proud of it. Now the bejeweled thing glittered at him mockingly.

Beric flung the cup away and stood, wishing he could fling away his burden of guilt as easily.

He hastened on through the snow-clad trees. No need to conserve his strength. Soon the cold trek would be over one way or another. His heavy sword dangled from his waist. His dagger, red with innocent blood, would never again leave its scabbard. He should have thrown it away, too. The deed he had done with it cast gloom over his heart.

The unrelenting wind pulled at his cloak. Dark clouds crouched low on the horizon. A killing storm would roll in by nightfall but Beric would be dead by then or home. He did not hope for the latter.

King Godfrey had explained everything so clearly. If King Roderick were to die, then war would end and the people could finally live in peace. What a Christmas blessing! Berick was King Godfrey's best man, the only one with the courage and resolve to do such a grim deed.

When Beric topped a rise he glanced back. The Dakhanni was closer. A breath of fear shivered his vitals. She was playing with him.

Without hope, he increased his pace. Some time later, atop another rise, he saw she was gone. That frightened him more than the sight of her soulless eyes peering up at him.

He rounded a familiar bend, almost home. In the snowy path sat his gold cup. He halted and drew his sword.

"Show yourself!" he called to the silent woods.

Only silence answered him. Frantically, he looked all around and up into the snow-laden tree branches. He kicked the cup into the underbrush and ran down the path. The sun far above

the dark clouds was sinking. The world was becoming gray and indistinct.

Then his gold cup landed in a little splash of snow before him. He stared at it, shivering. Daniza, the most famous Dakhanni, emerged out of shadow. Beric gripped his sword hilt. Danzia had not drawn her blade.

"Aren't you here to kill me?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "But you do not deserve the mercy of a quick death."

"I only did what I had to do," he said. "You would do no less."

"Dakhanni choose their killings. I would have done less."

"So you choose to kill me?"

She shrugged.

"Queen Allena sent you," said Beric bitterly. "You are her creature."

"I am her friend." Danzia drew her sword. "You murdered that which she loved more than life itself. You will not live to rejoice in that bloodshed."

Beric remembered Queen Allena's cry, vibrant with the agony of a damned soul. "There is no rejoicing in what I did." In fact, deepest regret rolled over him like the dark clouds above. Suddenly his sword was too heavy to lift.

"I will submit to you, Dakhanni, if you will grant a last wish."

"I can kill you where you stand whether you submit or not," she said with a touch of surprise. "What is your wish?

"To see the lights of my village." She said nothing, so he pressed on. "Walk with me. Only a mile or two further. When I see the lights I am yours."

She stared at him. He could detect no mental struggle, her gaze was impassive. "Put your sword beside the cup," she said. He had forgotten the cup in the snow ahead of him. He did as she asked. He thought of putting the dagger there also, but he didn't. He would bear that burden a little longer. He walked past her. A moment later she appeared at his side, silent as a shadow.

Beric had known that Queen Allena walked to church on Christmas Eve. He knew she would be protected by a single guard and the traditional Christmas truce between her people and his. Behind the queen walked a young maid carrying Roderick, the baby King. Beric had lain hidden beside the road. When the queen and the guard were well past, he snatched the maid and killed her silently. Beric caught the babe as it dropped from her lifeless arms. No more than half a year old, King Roderick looked at Beric with the wide curiosity of all infants and also died without a sound. That innocent look haunted Beric. It had disturbed what snatches of sleep he had been able to get since that moment.

Beric was the king's best soldier and he did what he had to do, but the deed had destroyed him. The Dakhanni would merely complete that destruction.

They topped a familiar rise that would overlook a sweet meadow in summer. The village nestled below in the curve of the valley. Many windows glowed yellow in the gathering gloom. In the distance Beric could hear the lowing cattle driven into a warm stable out of the coming storm. Tonight ended the third day of Christmas and peace lay on the land.

He felt a flash of pain as the Dakhanni blade entered his back. He fell to his knees, not taking his gaze from the village below. Then the last of the light failed and he fell forward into the unforgiving snow.

Immortal Quest

Amy R. Butler

Now I know how mere mortals feel.

For so long I had looked from above, watching their episodes with mild fascination and curiosity. I couldn't understand them, what they did or why they did it. And I said as much.

"Fools," I said loudly and often. "If only they knew…"

And often the other immortals would laugh and agree with me, joking about the latest act of folly one of the humans had committed.

Except for one. Gesa, one of the younger children, always looked up at me with wide, hurt eyes. "You don't know either," he'd say in his high, whisper-like voice. "You've never know what they have."

When he had first said that, it took me off guard. I stared at him a minute before laughing him off and quickly turning away. But I kept getting that same upset look, the same quietly accusing words. And one day Gesa seemed to have enough of my taunting, and he decided to teach me a lesson.

He cast me down, tripping me so that I fell headlong down to earth. I could hear his voice falling after me, solemn and righteous.

"Your contempt for our lesser brothers is spreading," he called after me. "You had to be stopped. You must be taught what it feels like to be mortal, and so you will stay on earth until you can complete for me a quest."

"What quest?" I cried out.

But even though I heard the first few words carried on the wind, his voice faded before I could hear all the instructions. I was trapped, without a map to escape the all-encompassing boarders of the earth.

Where I actually landed, I still don't know, but it snows here continually. I continually trudge through the blizzard. My feet are always cold and wet, and I'll lose feeling in my fingers and toes for hours at a time. The wind slaps my face and laughs and howls at me. And every day I scream at Gesa, tell him that I know now what it feels like to be a mortal, that I don't now what quest he demands that I fulfill.

I try not to have too much contact with the mortals. They make me uncomfortable, the pulsing, easily-excitable creatures with not enough knowledge to know what to do with the short existence they have. Luckily, I seem to be in a wilderness where few of them live, and I have little need for contact with them.

I bend my head against the wind. My sword is out in my hand, unsheathed the first day I cascaded down from the heavens. I haven't needed it at all, but now it seems to be frozen to my fingers. It's not dirtied or bloodied. It's just a weight in my hand, making my forced steps even slower.

It's so cold. I can see a single light ahead of me, high up, sometimes hidden by the swirls of snow. I make my way towards it slowly. It's a human residence, I know, but I can stand their purposeless existence for a few hours, just while I warm up for a little while.

As I get closer, it appears as a gray silhouette, and then it takes full form. It's a small castle, not the home of a great lord, but still comfortable for the inhabitants of this age. I stagger

up to where the portcullis, which is open, and into the courtyard. The small square is empty except for one mortal, bundled up in furs and scarves. It stops when it sees me, and I can tell it's waiting to see what I'm going to do. I approach it slowly, hoping to look unthreatening.

"Is your good lord in residence?" I ask the human.

The mortal – I can see it's a female now – nods. "Do you have business with him?"

"No," I reply. "I am but a quester, looking for a warm night's rest."

The girl regards me warily then nods again. "We extend hospitality to travelers. Follow me to the kitchen."

I limp after the girl to a small wooden door, and she heaves open against the wind with some difficulty. I step after her into the kitchen, which breathes on me heat and the smells of hearty food. The door closes behind me, and the howling of the wind is muted. The girl has unwrapped her several layers and is running about the kitchen, talking in hushed tones to the various cooks who are giving me suspicious stares.

I approach the large fire and sit down at one end, ignoring the humans. In a few minutes, the girl comes over and sits down next to me, handing me a bowl of stew and a mug of water.

I hoped she'd go away if I ignored her, but she starts talking without my encouragement.

"You said you were a quester," she starts to prattle. "Where are you from? What is your quest? Who did you leave behind?"

I stare into my bowl of food. How could I answer these questions? I feel like I have been wandering for years, and that I barely remember who I am.

"It's a little… complicated," I say and quickly become engaged in eating.

The girl is not to be deterred. She draws her knees up, rests her elbows on them and her head in her hands, and stares at me with anticipation. "I have the whole night."

And I hope Gesa can hear me screaming at him from inside me head, for I am still trapped in this place of mortal misery, without guidance to free myself. I have felt as humans feel, but I have not finished my quest.

Cursed Swords

By João Silva

He had been walking without pause to eat or sleep for two days when he reached the top of Dreamer's Cliff. Standing on the rocky edge, he finally stopped, not daring to look back. His path lay ahead and he would not give the curse a chance to tempt him. One more step was all it took. One more step and he would fall to sweet oblivion, free. And he couldn't take it.

'Why can't I put an end to my life?' he thought, releasing a frustrated moan. His legs twitched, aching to move, but his feet seemed bound to the ground by old roots. 'Must I be denied even such dishonorable fate?'

Rilken closed his eyes to shield them from the falling snow, the small ivory flakes stubbornly clinging to his blood stained face like frozen tears. 'Not my tears, I have no more of them. This damned sword took them too.' He looked at the fine long sword in his right hand, gold embroidered hilt held tight in his grip. His wish was to throw it away, to break the blade and cast the pieces to the angry skies, let them be swallowed by the fat clouds. But he couldn't. The sword wouldn't let him.

Inside his head, he could still hear the distant song that called to him, urging him to return to the Blessed King. In his thoughts he sang a louder song, a song of escape, marking the rhythm with each painful step forward. Perhaps it had been luck, or fate, that he had been the only one to resist that magical calling. His companions, the Knights of Solbron, who had fought at his side against the armies of Dulmein, now heeded that call, unable to do anything else but move towards the Nantuan Fortress. They all carried the same swords, gifts from the Blessed King. Magical gifts, but never blessed. Varn, the Blessed King, the Immortal, had been the ruler of Solbron for over two hundred years. Legend told his life was stretched by divine hands, but Rilken knew better now. The power came from the swords. They took the will from their bearers and the life from their enemies, and gave both to the King.

The sharp and magically engraved blade reflected the morning's pale colors, no blood in it. It should be drenched in crimson, the way his enemies had spilt red rivers of the precious liquid as the accursed weapon cut through them. The hungry blade had drank it all, keeping it for itself, for later, when its true master would claim it.

His blood, however, did not spill, though his wounds were red indeed. It held on like a second skin, refusing to leave his body. He would be denied death until the King had feasted on his life.

He knew the curse would not let him kill himself, not before his duty had been fulfilled, but he would cheat it. He would stand there, and wait. Eventually his legs would falter or the wind would blow too hard and he would fall the deadly height, without scream or fear, just relief. The sword would be lost forever in the cliff's everlasting snows, never to taint another soul, and the Blessed King would not have his share.

A Hero by Any Other Name

By Wade Albert White

Is this where the heroes sign up?"

Brezbar paused just as he was about to bite into the succulent roast minotaur sandwich his wife had packed in his lunch. A few drops of greasy juice ran down the side of his hand and dripped onto the countertop. He looked up to find a pair of greenish, pointy ears and a tangle of coarse, black hair sticking above the counter. "Yeah," he said. "What about it?"

"I want to join."

"Join?" Brezbar leaned out over the counter to get a better look. "You're a goblin."

"So?"

"So goblins can't be heroes." Brezbar eased back onto his stool and raised the sandwich once again to sneak in a few bites between customers. The smell of the spicy meat had him salivating before it even touched his mouth.

"Can't, or aren't?"

Brezbar paused again. "What?"

The goblin put two wiry hands on the counter and pulled himself up high enough to see over the top. "You said goblins can't be heroes." He wheezed with the effort of holding himself there. "But maybe they just aren't."

Brezbar licked his lips. "What's the difference?"

"*Can't* means it's not permitted. *Aren't* just means no goblins have tried it yet."

Brezbar considered this. He hadn't thought of it that way before. "Can't," he decided.

The goblin let go and dropped back down to the floor. "But why not?"

"Because, well, it's just not done. That's why."

"Maybe things could change."

"Doubtful."

"Hey!" The shout came from a burly dwarf further down the line. "How about moving things along? We've some dragons to hunt and some ale to acquaint ourselves with." A few others in the line grunted their agreement.

Brezbar motioned with his hand to indicate things would be moving along shortly. He leaned over the counter again. "Look, uh—I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Nibs."

"Look Nibs, I appreciate your position; really I do. But I'm afraid I can't do anything for you. We don't sign goblins as a matter of policy, and even if we started, I expect it would require documentation on your part demonstrating prior heroic deeds. You know, a show of goodwill, given the circumstances and all. Do you have anything like that?"

The little goblin shook his head.

"Well, then I'm afraid my hands are tied. But hey, I hear they're looking for more henchmen over at the Guild of Evil Overlords. Maybe you can find something there."

We don't sign goblins as a matter of policy, and even if we started, I expect it would require documentation on your part demonstrating prior heroic deeds.

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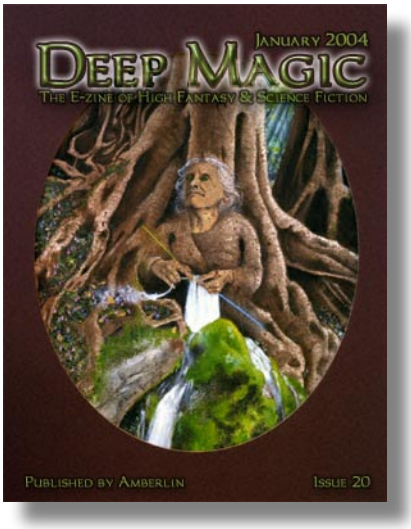
Featured Artist
Robin Wood



Age: 49
Residence: Near Detroit, MI
Marital Status: Married
Children: 2 stepsons, now grown.
Hobbies: Mostly, I just write and create pictures, because those are the things I love doing most. However, I get paid for doing them, so I'm not sure they qualify as hobbies. I also do some sewing, some gardening, and some visiting with friends.
Personal Quote: There are so many, I can't choose just one.
Favorite Book or Author: Once again, there are too many to list, and I can't choose among them.
Started Painting In: 1954. But I didn't do anything professionally until 1983.
Artist Most Inspired By: Caravaggio
Media You Work In: I used to work mostly in Oils and Colored Pencil; now I have to do everything on the computer. (I have fibromyalgia, and can't hold my arms up long enough to paint, or bear down hard enough to use the pencils any more.)
Schools Attended: Michigan State University; but I didn't study art there.
Other Training: I met artists at Science Fiction Conventions, and asked every question I could think of to ask.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: I did a lot of work for TSR, mostly Dragon Magazine covers and catalog prototypes, with some smatterings of other stuff. I also did a lot for Llewellyn Worldwide, mostly book covers and a Tarot deck. I did a book called "People of Pern" for Donning, back in the 80s. And I've worked for other companies here and there, doing things like Gaming cards and scenarios, and occasionally tape and book covers. I've also written articles for gaming magazines, and published two books with Living-tree Books.
Website: http://www.robinwood.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I was born this way. I quite literally teethed on Prismacolor pencils (they belonged to my mother, who claims that I stopped drawing stick figures be-

continued on next page

fore I was 2.) I've always been interested in art, drawing pictures in my notebooks while I was supposed to be taking notes all through school. Eventually, I discovered Science Fiction Conventions, and learned that people would pay me to do this, and I've been doing it ever since.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: As realistic fantasy, or perhaps as the intersection of fantasy and reality. I tend to do pictures of things from the everyday world with stuff from other realms here and there. Or stuff from other realms with things from our everyday world in them.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: When you get your Artistic License from the clearing house in Poughkeepsie, they send you a package of Inspiration, and a subscription to the Idea of the Month club....oh wait; that's a secret.

Really, I get it from the things that are all around me, every day. The interplay of light and shadow, things glimpsed from the corner of my eye, dreams, or odd snatches of conversation make pictures in my mind. Then all I have to do is put them down on paper.

I have often said that I've never painted anything I haven't seen. I just combine things a little differently than usual.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)
A: This tree was growing in Okinawa, Japan, where I lived for a while in the early 80s. It was also very humid there, and sometimes it felt as though, if I only knew how, I could draw the humidity out of the air, and make it
into a cooling waterfall. That, combined with the concept of the Earth Mother, and with the idea of the power, wisdom, and grandeur of age, was the seed that grew into this piece.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Other artists and writers, the world around me, dreams, light, shadows, and my own world-view, not necessarily in that order.

continued on next page

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Well, I've enjoyed all of it, and I guess you could say I've been successful. But I hope that my greatest success is still ahead of me.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Once again, it's hard to say. There is so much out there that I don't make any attempt to read all of it. I mostly read things that have been written by my friends, or by authors that I've been reading for years. So I don't think I'd notice any trends.

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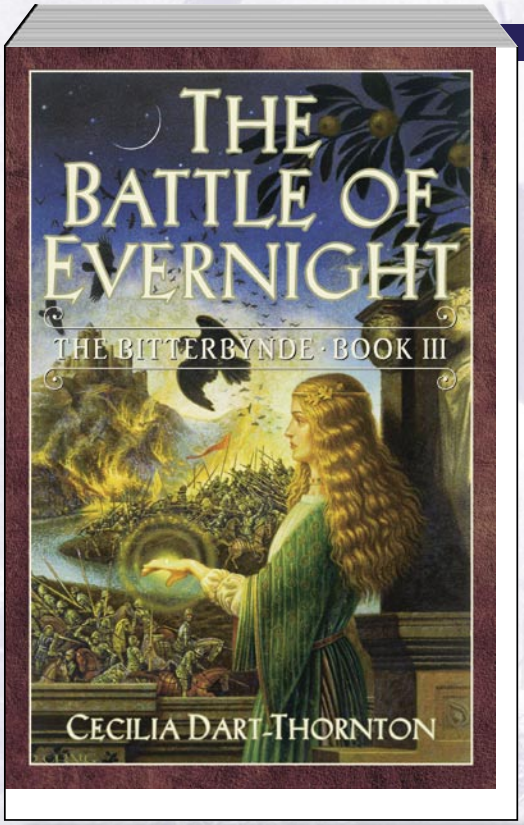

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Limbo The Black-Souled

By Steve Poling

Fairy stepped into the Motley Unicorn Tavern and waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. The bar was smoky, but she liked the aromatic scent of whatever weed the Wizards smoked in their impractically-long pipes. She nodded to the barkeep. He gave her a wink and continued drying flagons. She was tired from a hectic week in the Enchanted Forest and wanted to relax. She waved to a table of friends. Her old boyfriend Brad, the White Knight, tried to catch her eye, but she ignored him. He'd probably make a pass after a couple flagons of mead.

In the back, a couple Wizards were throwing darts. The darts looked like hummingbirds and would hover for a moment before sticking their bills into the dartboard. Some of the Dwarves were getting rowdy. It was Friday night and they were having their weekly Elf tossing contest.

At the end of the bar sat Limbo The Black-Souled. Behind him the neon of a Hamm's beer sign glowed, giving him a red-orange nimbus. Guys like him were evil, but they could be counted on to buy the drinks while gloating over their villainy. She took the seat next to his.

"'Sup Rusty?" Nobody used Limbo The Black-Souled's working name in casual conversation because the Motley Unicorn was a drinking establishment off limits for all conflicts, quests, and crusades between Good and Evil. The struggle was thirsty work, and the Motley Unicorn existed to quench the thirst of anyone with the coin, or a friendly drinking partner to buy a round or two.

In the back, a couple Wizards were throwing darts. The darts looked like hummingbirds and would hover for a moment before sticking their bills into the dartboard.

"Hi Fairy." Rusty's carrot-red hair was cut in a short flat-top, but it wasn't perfectly flat. The corners in the front were a little longer, forming points. He motioned to the barkeep to bring two flagons of beer. "Strangest thing happened last night. I've been in a funk all day."

"That sounds ominous." Fairy sipped her beer and smirked. "Who's going to stop the Forces of Light from taking over and enforcing the temperance laws?"

"You don't think they'd do something like that, do you? They'd close the Motley Unicorn, or turn it into a coffee shop? I can't stand poets." Rusty furrowed his brow. "They'd probably stop Wet T-Shirt Night."

Fairy never entered the weekly contests, but she didn't begrudge everyone else from having some fun. "You never can tell with those Goodie Two-Shoes types. What has you in a funk?"

Rusty took a long pull from his beer. "The strangest dream. I stayed up late formulating my next Insidious Plot against Xero the Warrior Babe. I fell asleep at my conjuring desk and I dreamed that my Minions were fighting her again." Rusty stopped and looked Fairy in the eye. "You wouldn't want a job as a Minion, would you? I've got a new benefits plan, full medical, and a 401k starting in January."

Fairy shook her head. "No thanks. I've seen your Orc uniforms and I'm not into slime that much. Thanks for the offer, though. Tell me about your dream."

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Vocabulary

By Cecilia Dart-Thornton

I love words. They are an art form. The very shape of letters and written words fascinates me; capital 'A's like sharp mountain peaks; the tails of 'y's trailing down like creepers of ivy; 'i' with its spot of confetti, or like a lighthouse, or a candle; 'C' like a celtic sickle moon. 'V' is a spearhead or an arrowhead. The word "Scintillating' is dotted with three twinkling motes of light. "Susurrus, in addition to being onomatopoeic, visually ripples along like waves.

Painting is one of my hobbies, and when I write I use words as if they were colours. Writing a story is like painting a picture using numerous colours, and employing a vast range of tints, hues, vibrancy, depth, saturation and tone. By using a wider spectrum, the writer paints virtual pictures of greater interest. The number of colours that can be displayed by a modern computer monitor is so high that the manufacturers don't bother to give an exact count, and call it 'millions'. Given the choice of millions of colours on the screen why would anyone deliberately limit the number to 250? The educated eye might not know the names of each of those millions of colours, but the effect, compared to 250 colours, is dramatic and immediate, and speaks for itself.

Apart from the visual aspect, I love words because of their power and meaning. Their power is immense, incalculable. Great writers and orators change the course of history. The meanings of words influence culture, as much as culture influences meaning. There is mutual enrichment. To quote from "The Story of English", page 67, 'To this day, the power of the English language to express the same thought or object in either an early vernacular or a more elaborate Latinate style is one of its most remarkable characteristics, and one which enables it to have a unique subtlety and flexibility of meaning.'

We would be the poorer for not using the subtleties and riches that are available to us. These days the vocabulary of an educated person is estimated to be around 15,000 words. Shakespeare used approximately 30,000 words. The Oxford English Dictionary lists some 500,000 and this would figure double, were technical and scientific terms to be added to the catalogue.

The English language is an exciting and restless palette. It commands a sweeping vocabulary, and it is always changing; borrowing words from other languages, bringing new ones into existence, altering shades of meaning, discarding the archaic and next moment reviving it. Because such a lavish cornucopia of sound and meaning is available to writers in this language, it makes sense to utilize it.

continued from "A Taste of Earth" in Issue 12

A Spark of Life

By Darrell Newton

"God may be subtle, but he isn't plain mean."
~ *Albert Einstein*

Santa Monica Beach, California

Mark Clemens edged closer to the meteorite fragment. The sun glinted off its smooth, metallic surface and warmed the visor of his hazardous materials protection suit. Through the thick lining, he heard sand shift beneath his feet as he walked toward the receding waves. The respirator seal chafed against his cheeks and his nose screamed for relief as a bead of sweat trickled down, but he was powerless to scratch it. He took a deep breath. He wished he could smell the salt tang, but instead inhaled the pasty, sanitized air from the heavy tank strapped to his back.

"It appears to be about a meter in diameter." He spoke to his colleague Dr. John Eastman at the Palomar Observatory via an internal cell phone. They were both a part of the Near Earth Asteroid Tracking team, NEAT, established to detect near asteroids large enough to threaten global disaster. They had tracked one called Hachiman, but when they tried diverting it with missiles it dodged all but one, shattered into fragments, and scattered environment-altering microbes across the earth. "It doesn't look like a typical meteorite; more like a large frying pan with two handles."

While the Operations Engineer Aaron and two Hazardous Materials specialists took water and soil samples, Mark edged closer to the object to take measurements, wondering if the designers of his suit thought to insulate him from alien microbes. He heard his own heavy breathing in his respirator and felt more like an astronaut walking on the moon than an astronomer walking on the beach. He glanced up and noted a large crowd at the pier dressed to party out their last hours on earth. They stared at him from behind a line of thin yellow police tape, and gave the scene a circus atmosphere. He wondered if they would have to be decontaminated.

"Go on," John demanded. "What does it look like?"

"No, it's not a pan ... more like a bloated disk ... an ellipsoid. The handles are long cones pointing out towards the ocean. The cones intersect spheres the size of softballs almost at their ends. The color is … it's hard to tell. Appears to be copper and brass mixed … in a marble

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

By now, you should be used to reading our book reviews here in Deep Magic. Month after month, our reviewers examine current and classic fantasy and science fiction novels. But what if you want to go back and read past reviews? Of course, you can always open up the old issues. But we have a better way. We are proud to introduce our new Book Reviews website! This website contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. And keep your eyes out, because we just may offer reviews on the website that never show up here in the e-zine.

As an added bonus, the Book Reviews website also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do it register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

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Editor's Choice: Classic Fantasy
The Well at the World's End
By William Morris

This month, when we say 'classic fantasy,' we truly mean it: William Morris was born in 1834 and died in 1896, making his life almost coterminous with the reign of Victoria. Indeed there are not many figures more Victorian than Morris. He was not only an author, but also a poet, artist, and designer. His influence is truly great—not just to fantasy. But his influence on fantasy is strong nonetheless, having influenced both J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

Of his many books, the one considered to be his masterpiece is *The Well at the World's End*. The story is a very simple one: Ralph is the youngest son of the minor king of Upmeads. His older brothers are allowed to go off on adventures, but Ralph has to stay at home because he is his father's favorite. Ralph quickly chafes and sets out on his own adventures. After numerous adventures, Ralph finds the Well at the World's End, a type of fountain of youth, drinks from it, and returns victorious with his loved one to his father's kingdom.

What makes *The Well at the World's End* such an important book is that it is the first fantasy to create a well-realized and unified fantasy world. This is no longer a dream-world or our historic past with fantasy thrown in, but a true secondary world. The society is still medieval (and thus, in a way, based on our own). However, it is not just a copy of our world but a fully realized world with its own rules. Even more impressive is the landscape that Ralph moves through. Indeed, the landscape itself can be said to be a character in the book, from the nearly eponymous Upmeads to the cloud-enshrouded mountain range known as the Wall of the World. C.S. Lewis wrote of Morris, 'No mountains in literature are as far away as distant mountains in Morris,' a true tribute to the convincing nature of Morris' writing.

One downside to the book, however, is that Morris wrote in a very high style, and so his writing can sometimes be inaccessible. I love the strong diction and style, but I find I sometimes have to take Morris in small portions to get through one of his books. But patience is well rewarded. Don't approach this book expecting something written in a twentieth or twenty-first century style. But if you bear with the antiquities captured within the pages, you'll find the read worth it.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

Green Rider

By Kristen Britain

Some authors try to imagine what it would be like to engage in a daring horseback pursuit through a rugged wilderness. Few authors have the life experience to match the vision. Knowing about Kristen Britain's background as a National Park ranger proved she wasn't bluffing with her vivid description of scenery and her experience with the dangers of the wilderness.

Green Rider begins as a wild ride through the expansive kingdom of Sacoridia. The protagonist is Karigan G'ladheon, the daughter of a wealthy clan merchant, who starts the tale as a newly expelled student on her way back home. She comes in contact with a dying Green Rider named F'ryan Coblebay. The Green Riders are the messenger service of the Sacoridian king, Zachary. She bravely accepts the trust to deliver a fateful message to the king and takes Coblebay's steed, cloak, and weapon. The magic of the Green Riders accepts her and the chase is on.

Britain's world is straightforward high fantasy. She is pursued by evil agents of the Shadow Man – the enemy who struck down Coblebay and other Riders with two black arrows – and must fight past mercenaries and evil things creeping from beyond the cracked wall blocking the Kanmorhan Vane, an ancient forest full of evil things. Karigan makes friends and enemies along the way to Sacor City. Other chapters interspersed through the tale show the broiling politics of the kingdom and the plots of an ambitious governor who seeks the throne for himself.

Karigan encounters plenty of obstacles along the way, not the least of which is the reputation of the Green Riders. Their legacy of using magic (in the form of a brooch) makes others distrust them. Karigan discovers that the life of a Green Rider is hard, that even bearing message in the king's name is not enough of a protection throughout the king's realm, especially in dangerous cities like North. But there are others, like the Berry Sisters, the forester Abram Rust, and even a friendly Eletian named Somial – an elf for all intents of purposes – who offer their aid during her journey.

The climax of the book does not end with her delivering her message to King Zachary. For despite the speed of her journey, she does not arrive in time to stop the wheels of politics that had started before her journey commenced. But it does place her in Sacor City where she can attempt to stop that wheel from turning any further.

Britain does a commendable job creating the world and realm of Sacoridia. The scenes are well-painted, and the cultures and professions are cleanly defined. Green Riders have a reputation for being risky adventurers compelled to take the brooch and ride throughout the land, whereas Weapons, the royal bodyguards, are known as single-minded swordmasters sworn to protect the nobility. The very nature of the story – the tale of a college-age young woman riding across the country – did not lend itself well to establishing characters through dialogue. After all, Karigan really only had the horse to talk to for much of the book. But even in the scenes where Karigan interacted with new personalities, the dialogue did little to develop her or brighten up the setting. It was the weakest leg of an otherwise strongly written book.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

Book Review: Fantasy

The Light of Eidon

By Karen Hancock

Abramm Kalladorne is the fifth son of the king of Kiriath. As such, he has no hope for attaining the throne or even of being someone of political importance. Thus, at an early age, he feels he can pursue the life he wants: that of a monk, a follower of the Flame of Eidon. He has now been a novitiate of the Flame for eight years

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and is ready to take his final set of vows that would irrevocably bind him to the order of the Flame, when some strange happenings occur. As he is making his pilgrimage to where he will take his vows, some of the populace riot to bring him out of the order, for it seems that his older brothers and father have all mysteriously died while Abramm was cloistered away. Abramm now stands second in line to the throne. Further, Abramm meets with his twin sister Carisssa who warns him that his spiritual mentor, the head of his order, is grasping for power and wants to put Abramm on the throne.

Further political machinations ensue, resulting in Abramm being sold into slavery by his brothers, in part as the only way to save him from the political turmoil and in part to keep him from attaining the throne. Abramm is taken across the great sea to the country of Esurh where he is sold to a master who trains Abramm to participate in the Games, gladiatorial events around which the Esurhians have centered their culture. The once pacifistic Abramm now doubts the very essence of his faith and thus, to everyone's surprise, quickly rises to become the greatest warrior in the Games.

But there is, of course, more going on, for the subjugated people, the Dorsaddi, believe Abramm is their foretold savior. Abramm, however, is very agnostic in his belief, not wanting to be hurt again by any belief.

It is against this backdrop that Abramm must fight his final battle, a battle he can win only by determining what he is going to believe.

The Light of Eidon is the first book in a new series by Karen Hancock, published by Christian publisher Bethany House, entitled "Legends of the Guardian King." The cover, I believe, is going to win the Cheesiest Cover of the Year Award. The old adage is that one should not judge a book by its cover, but it's not easy to not have some prejudice when faced with such a high cheese-factor. From its packaging, I was expecting *The Light of Eidon* to be a marginally written novel, more concerned with putting forth certain religious beliefs ahead of telling a story, what historian Martin Marty once referred to as evangelical genre fiction. Still, I persevered and was quite pleasantly surprised. Yes, Ms. Hancock's beliefs are here, but they are integrated well into the story so that they do not appear out of place. When Abramm has his moment of decision, his actions are not superficial or corny, but are the natural outworking of all that has happened to him so far. And much *has* happened to him by that point. One of the shortcomings of books put out by Christian houses is that the characters tend to be squeaky clean before their moment of faith. Abramm, however, does not live a virtuous life as a slave, and for this I applaud Ms. Hancock, for she only strengthens her book by being true to her characters.

The characters are strong and believable, well-rounded and breathing of life. The shortcoming of the book, however, is that the fantasy world they inhabit is not well realized or enduring. Where Morris (see review above) has created a world that one feels exists beyond the edge of the page, one gets the feeling that Ms. Hancock's world exists only as far as the narrative needs it to. Look a little bit beyond and all you'll see is a blank set, waiting for the story line to create a setting for it. Still, what is created is plausible and enjoyable, no worse than many secondary worlds created today.

I am of the age where I recall Lawhead's Pendragon trilogy originally coming out and being a monumental shift in evangelical genre fiction's attitude toward allowing realistic conflict in its characters. I believe that Bethany House's current fantasy/sci-fi line is a further step toward that, and Ms. Hancock's series will be a beacon in a strong line.

Possible objectionable material: a brief sexual encounter occurs behind the scenes, but makes an otherwise acceptable book problematic for young readers.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Classic Fantasy

Tales Before Tolkien: The Roots of Modern Fantasy

Edited by Douglas A. Anderson

There's a plethora of books about J.R.R. Tolkien right now, ranging from literary criticism to spiritual devotionals. It seems the marketers have hit practically

continued on next page

every possible niche, many times using Tolkien's name more for marketing purposes than because the book has much to do with Tolkien. For Tolkien fans, though, it's a good time to be alive.

But, unfortunately, a lot of what's being published is quite forgettable, so it takes a bit of work to sift the wheat from the dross. Luckily, *Tales Before Tolkien* is a great book and a strong inclusion on anyone's shelves. Douglas A. Anderson, editor of *The Annotated Hobbit*, has gathered together 22 tales, poems, and plays of early fantasists who either are known to have been read by Tolkien, or who were important to the fledgling fantasy literature during Tolkien's formative years. Each selection is prefaced by a brief introduction that sets the context for the tale. However, the tales and not the scholarly apparatus dominate this book. The 'big names' that one would expect are here—William Morris, George MacDonald, E. Nesbit, Lord Dunsany, William Hope Hodgson—but also included are names less commonly heard today: Ludwig Tieck, Francis Stevens, Richard Garnett. Thus, the book balances itself out quite well and is a great introduction to anyone who is not familiar with the fantasy field before Tolkien and Lewis. And for the real brave adventurer, there is a list of recommended reading in the back of the book that points to many gems that can still be found both on the Internet and at a good library.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Deeper Magic - A collection of short stories from the first year of Deep Magic.
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All the Right Reasons

By Chris Przybyszewski

Sebastian called for his mother with weak words. The fantasy of his dream and the reality of his memory of her dead body meshed into a frightened whole.

He could see the brightness of her green eyes and the darkness of her dried blood fade in his mind's eye. His heart beat as if he had been running and he sweated freely, so that his silk sleeping shirt clung to his body. Then he remembered where he lay, in his quarters in the First Temple of Rhoras. Moreover, Sebastian remembered his position in the world. "I am the First Defender of the Aleph's Words of Power," he said aloud. Saying the words made them true. At least, he thought that to be true.

Sebastian called a Word of power named Light and his reality changed from opaque to clear. Now he could see the four-posted bed, the texture of his embroidered sheets, his pair of blades on the wall, the sconce with its unlit candle, and his desk piled with parchments. His eyes drifted to the room's only painting, a picture of St. Rhoras teaching peasants to read. In his mind-light, he could not see the colors the artist had painted on the canvas. Rather, he could see only the lights and darks starkly contrasted there.

He pulled on a robe of wool and walked across his room to the blades. He traced his fingers across the cool metal to the hilts of burnished silver with ivory inlay. The people saw the blades as symbols of his office and as part of the vision of Saint Rhoras, the first man to be the Defender and Reader of the Aleph's Sacred Words. "I see you only as a burden," Sebastian said to the swords.

The room became noticeably quieter and Sebastian smiled. He had unpleasant memories of the same sorts of displeasure

Sebastian looked to his new bouquet of flowers that he picked the previous morning. The roses showed in contrasting hues of black and white in his mind-light. He looked to his desk, with the multiple sheets of half-finished papers. He sat and began his work.

Three hours later, the sun rose over Rhoras' temple in the land of Rhoras. He relaxed his control over the room's interior. His reality gelled with the reality of the rest of the world. He released the Word of power and read over his completed work and that last, difficult letter: a letter of importance and of certainty, written without surety. An order to quell the stuff of life, he knew. An order to protect life, he believed. He placed a Word of power named Protection over the documents and then he went downstairs for breakfast.

Sebastian found Loris, the First Reader of Rhoras, sitting toward the middle of the long food hall. The ever-present smoke from the large hearths hung in the air, obscuring his sight and filling his lungs. Loris sat eating his breakfast and testing an older apprentice.

"And what does that flag represent?" Loris asked the young man with pale blond hair and startling blue eyes. The apprentice screwed his face in concentration, but no words came out of his mouth. "It's not so hard," Loris commented. His gentle voice contrasted with his great, gray beard and plain swords, one strapped crosswise over each shoulder. Loris wore his deep blue robes and an enameled chain of office. Stitched on the First Reader's right breast, the symbol of

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Nibs nodded and trudged back to the exit.

Brezbar shook his head. What next? he thought, as he picked up his sandwich again. There were all manner of crackpots and lunatics in the world. It was just his luck that sooner or later most of them found their way through his door.

* * *

"You want me to what?"

Lesander swung his spiked tail about lazily, like a three story high cat reclining across a patch of sunlight on the floor on a hot summer's day.

"Let me chase you out of the village," said Nibs.

The dragon furrowed his brow. "I don't get it."

"I need to do a heroic deed, and chasing away dragons is generally considered to be a heroic deed. It happens in all the books."

"True. But you could also rescue a damsel, or go on a long and treacherous journey, or fight on the losing side of a great battle—"

"I don't actually want to do a real heroic deed. I just need something to get me the papers."

The dragon picked up a bone from the cave floor and began digging between his teeth. "What for?"

"So that I can become a hero and do real honest-to-goodness heroic deeds," said Nibs.

"So why not just do a real one now?"

Nibs threw his hands in the air. "Because I don't want to get myself killed before I actually become a hero. What would be the point in that?"

Lesander gave a noncommittal grunt. He stopped picking his teeth for a moment. "But wouldn't doing a heroic deed make you a hero anyway? Or am I missing something here?"

Nibs shrugged. "Apparently goblins need a little momentum."

Lesander resumed poking around his mouth. "I don't know, Nibs. Why not just stay being a goblin? You're quite good at it, you know. I think it suits you."

"I'm tired of it. I want to try something else."

"And you thought you'd try hero?" He tossed the bone away and began using his talon instead. "Let me tell you, friend, most of the heroes I've met were jerks."

"And the rest?"

Lesander grinned. "Just tasty."

Nibs sat down on a rock and kicked at the dirt. "I really think I want to do this, Lesander, and I'll never know for sure unless I try."

The dragon turned his head and spit out a gauntlet. "Ah, that's better." He turned back to Nibs. "Look, it's up to you. You want to be a hero, who am I to stop you?"

"Thanks, Lesander. You won't regret this."

"We'll see."

* * *

Smoke billowed from the blackened remains of several village houses. A crowd gathered in the main square opposite Lesander, who had a fishing net thrown over him. Nibs stood in

between, holding a rusty sword and wearing a dented, conical helmet. Several dozen heavily muscled men in gleaming breastplates and wielding double edged swords shoved their way through the mass of onlookers. The tallest of them stepped forward.

"You two give yourselves up," he said, "and we'll make sure your deaths are reasonably swift and only moderately painful."

"Us two?" Nibs looked around. "But I'm helping you folks."

"Nonsense! You're in league with that beast!"

"But I'm the one who fought him off." Nibs made a few weak slashing motions with his sword. Many of the townsfolk took a couple of steps back, and some of the women hugged their children to themselves.

"You're a goblin," said the man. "Everyone knows that goblins and dragons work together."

"No they don't," said Nibs. "Dragons eat goblins."

"Close enough!"

Nibs took a tentative step forward and lowered his voice. "Look, I'm just trying to do a heroic deed here. I wasn't looking for any trouble."

"Ah, a freelancer, eh? Trying to cut in on our business."

"No, I'm just—"

"There are rules, you know. We have a union. We don't take kindly to strangers who think they can come along and slice the dragons out from under us."

"But I want to join with you, to be one of you."

"A pathetic creature like you? Ridiculous."

"I'm not asking you to take my word for it. Let me prove it to you by chasing this dragon away."

The man frowned. "Just a minute." He consulted with his comrades. A heated debate ensued with much flailing of arms and poking of shoulders. When the man returned, he had a look on his face that Nibs found disconcerting. "Fine," he said. "We'll agree to see things your way, but we require one thing of you first."

"All right. What is it?"

"Finish him off."

"Finish him off? You mean . . ."

"Yes. Kill the dragon. Do that, and we'll even put in a good word for you down at the office ourselves."

Nibs looked over at Lesander. The dragon rolled his eyes in a way that Nibs was sure meant he was on his own getting out of this one. The little goblin shuffled his feet. "I, er, expect he's probably plenty scared already. Why don't I just take the net off. I'm sure he'll run along and stop bothering you good folks."

"Not good enough. We want blood!"

Some of the bystanders took that as a cue. They began shaking pitchforks and rolling pins and chanting, "We want blood! We want blood!"

Lesander leaned over and spoke low into Nibs's ear. "Just so you know, there's a limit to the extent of my participation in this little charade you've got going here."

"I know, I know," hissed Nibs. "I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

"Well?" said the man. "We're waiting. What's your answer, hero?"

"Perhaps we could negotiate with him?" said Nibs.

"Negotiate? With a dragon? Never!"

"But maybe he's got a family that he needs to feed. You know how demanding kids can be. Surely we can all appreciate that." There were a few nods and murmurs from the crowd.

"Are you asking us to sympathize with this creature?" The man brandished his sword in a threatening manner. "See here, goblin, we have delivered our verdict. Either kill him and join us, or step aside and let some real heroes do the job."

"But I thought heroes were supposed to be understanding and kind and considerate and patient and looked for ways to settle things peacefully."

The man laughed. "What sissy brochures have you been reading?" He flexed his arm and patted his bicep. "This is heroism right here. Raw strength, plain and simple. We've not the time to coddle weaklings and . . . thinkers."

"Maybe that should change."

"Maybe you should get out of the way."

"I'm beginning to think this hero business isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"And I'm beginning to think you'd look good mounted on my wall."

"Ah, screw it then!" Nibs tossed his sword aside and walked back to Lesander. "I've had it with this lot. They're all yours."

Lesander reared up and snapped the netting with ease. "Oh, goody," he said, and smacked his lips.

* * *

Nibs sat glumly by the fire and turned the spit. As it rotated, a few remaining shreds of tunic fell away and were licked up by the flames.

"Look at it this way," said Lesander between bites, "you stuck up for me against all those large fellows, so that makes you a kind of a sort of hero, doesn't it?"

"Not to them it doesn't."

"So? Who're they? A bunch of loud-mouthed bullies who wouldn't know a true hero if one ran up and bit them on the arse."

Nibs scratched his chin. "Would a hero bite someone on the arse?"

"Well, if he had reason to, I suppose—"

"But why would—"

"My point being," continued Lesander, "that I like to think peoples' actions say a lot more about them than any silly titles or papers or any of that business."

"So what do our actions today say about us?"

"Well, I suppose some might say it just goes to show that what folks think about us is correct—we're evil, malicious, and the enemies of civilized people everywhere."

"And what do you say?"

"I say it shows that we're not about to be pushed around by a bunch of namby-pamby, good-for-nothing, know-it-all schlumps." He tossed a thigh bone over his shoulder. "It also shows that a hundred and forty-eight to one are still good odds for a dragon."

Nibs sighed. "I suppose. But I really did like the idea of being a hero, you know. There was something appealing about the whole thing."

"I'm just glad we got the whole mess straightened out. And in plenty of time for dinner, too."

Nibs stretched and leaned back in a chair made from the ribs of a horse. "Still, I was

thinking I should check out the Wizard's Academy over in Treebark Junction. A goblin mage might be something of a novelty for them."

Lesander rolled his eyes. "Just shut up and pass the salt."

The End

Wade Albert White attends the University of Toronto where he is pursuing a Ph.D. in Septuagint Studies. He spends much of his time reading ancient manuscripts and claims that they give him weird ideas for stories. Of course, he also claims that fish talk to him. His work has appeared elsewhere in 2003 at Strange Horizons. To contact him, send e-mail to wade.white@sympatico.ca.

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"We cornered Xero in a corner of the Enchanted Forest."

"For a forest, the Enchanted Forest has a lot of corners." Fairy picked at the label on her flagon.

"You're right. I've never thought of that. Anyway, we had her surrounded and outnumbered ten to one. You know--the usual. And she was beating up all my Minions, as you'd expect. But this time, the strangest thing happened. She'd just knocked out the last of my Minions and she was advancing and pointing the Singing Sword at me. I was about to do my usual Craven Coward bit and run away when I heard a voice say, 'Show some spine, you wuss.' Then I noticed that my hand held the strangest weapon."

"An Enchanted Sword?"

"No, something really strange. It was light tan and made of wood, perfectly smooth and it bore the strangest rune."

"What did the rune say?"

"'Louisville Slugger.' Can you imagine someone carving part of a tree's corpse into such an object?"

Someone put coins in the jukebox and the strains of "Mama Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Werewolves" filled the bar.

"Weird. Then what?"

"Well, you remember she was pointing the Singing Sword at me and I was backed up against a tree. So, I tried to fend her off."

"How so?"

"Well, you know how Xero the Warrior Babe wears this big metal hubcap on her chest. It doesn't quite obscure her décolletage."

"Yeah. It must be a pain to keep polished."

"I shoved the end of this weapon at the center of the hubcap--hard. You should have seen the silicone jiggle."

Fairy winced, "Sounds painful. I've never heard of anyone doing that to Xero before."

"Me neither. After I did that, she fell backwards and started crying. I helped her up and asked if I could get her some chamomile tea. I felt really bad."

"You should. That would hurt."

"Yeah, but for the last five years, she's been kneeing me and my Minions in the groin every week. Never thought something like that might work both ways. A bunch of my buddies from the Legion of Evil ate lunch here today. None of them had ever heard of such a thing."

"Me neither. Were you eating Magic Mushrooms before bed?"

The Motley Unicorn kept bowls of snacks on the bar. The blue bowls held pretzels or peanuts, but the red bowls held Magic Mushrooms because the dwarves liked to munch on them. A mix-up could give one visions.

"No, I wasn't eating any Magic Mushrooms. I got up first thing and went to work. On my way, I stopped at a Sporting Goods store and found all sorts of cool weapons just like in my dream. Once I got to work, Xero showed up and my Minions cornered her, also just like in my dream. After she beat up the first Minion, I pulled him aside and asked him, 'Have you ever thought of maybe not being STUPID when you're fighting Xero?' He hadn't."

"No way."

"Way. So I handed him a Louisville Slugger and in a thrice it happened."

"How long is a thrice?"

"A little less than ten seconds. Anyway, she was lying on the ground crying. Nobody had

any herb tea, but my minions had several wineskins of California Merlot. I think my Minions have been drinking on the job. That may explain why they've been so stupid all these years. Anyway, I didn't know Xero couldn't hold her liquor. She emptied a wineskin and started noticing how buff my Minions are. You know I like to hire them beefy. Then she made a pass at the one who knocked her down. It was unnatural."

"Woah. That sounds scary."

"I had my Minions tie Xero up. She didn't mind. I would have never guessed she's into that sort of thing."

"Then what?"

"That's the strangest part. I didn't gloat and tell her all about my Insidious Plan for World Domination and then do something stupid so she could escape and foil my plan. Instead, I had an inspiration. I put my Minions to work hauling her back to my Castle and making her do my ironing. You know. It's hard to look dapper when you're trying to conquer the world."

Fairy looked pensive. "You know, I never noticed this before, but the Heroes of the Forces of Light are all impeccably dressed. You think they kidnap warrior babes and keep them in their castles ironing?"

Across the bar, one of the Dwarves lost his balance mid-toss and heaved an Elf into the crowd. The Elf came up swinging and a small melee erupted.

Rusty nodded. "I think so. You know what else? None of them surround themselves with a crowd of stupid Minions. That's the first thing I'm going to change."

"Really? Does that mean you're dropping the slimy Orc uniforms?"

"Yup. But I'll have to hire more staff to keep things looking spic and span. Maybe I'll kidnap more warrior babes. And the Minion budget will have to be cut."

"Why don't you lay off all your Minions and replace them with a Quirky Sidekick?"

Rusty leaned back and thought for a minute. From the looks of it, he was doing some mental arithmetic. "You're right, if I get rid of ALL the Minions, that'll free up enough money to both hire a Quirky Sidekick and pay the Forces of Light Union dues. You know, the only reason why I joined the Legion of Evil was that their membership fees were cheaper." The red Hamm's sign flickered and went out, leaving a smirking neon blue bear. Its blue glow mixed with the smoky atmosphere of the Motley Unicorn, casting Rusty in a completely different light.

"That won't make any friends with the Intergalactic Brotherhood of Minions Union," Fairy said.

"Not a problem. I'll close down Dark-Souled Enterprises and reincorporate under a new name. I always liked 'Lance.' They won't be able to do anything."

"Sounds like a plan. Will you release Xero the Warrior Babe?"

"Nah. If I become a Hero, I won't let it affect my lifestyle. Besides, 'Lance, Champion of Good' will need lots of ironed shirts." Rusty tugged at the tail of his shirt and smoothed out a few wrinkles in his sleeves. He rubbed his hair and tried to smooth over its spikiness. "I think I'll wear a wig until my hair grows out. I wonder if Xero can cook?" Rusty looked up suddenly. "You want the Quirky Sidekick gig?"

"No slime?"

"None."

"What kind do you have in mind, fatuous and funny, or smart and cynical?"

"You pick."

The End

Steve Poling is a C/C++ poet, committing random acts of software development by day. At night he scribbles stories. He aspires to someday channel C.S. Lewis and write something way cool. Steve is a practicing Puritan (someday he'll get it right) who enjoys witch baiting in his spare time. See http://steve.poling.info/ for more.

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pattern."

"It can't be a meteorite fragment," John said.

"Of course not. It's a terraforming probe."

"A probe ... as in extraterrestrial? How do you suggest it got here? Did it piggyback on the meteor, or was it a victim of circumstance, stuck to the meteor by accident?" John was a Yale graduate in astrophysics and an expert on meteor composition. Even though Mark held an equivalent degree from Caltech, John's career always seemed to be one step ahead of his. A master of subtlety, John never missed an opportunity to remind Mark of their differences. "Maybe it will be grateful for being rescued. "

Mark frowned at John's irony. Even though they had graduated with equivalent degrees, John never passed up an opportunity to remind Mark of his expertise on meteor composition. John's career always seemed to be one step ahead of his.

"Not funny." Mark edged closer until his curiosity and fear reached equilibrium. It almost looked like a large horseshoe crab. He pointed his infrared thermometer gun at it, but froze when a thought seized him. *What if the object can see and thinks the thermometer is a weapon?* He brushed the thought aside as a childish fear and took readings from several angles. "The entire surface temperature reads five degrees C above ambient, even underneath. So there must be some ..."

"Some sort of internal mechanism maintaining a constant thermal distribution."

"Like body temperature," Mark muttered.

"More likely," John said, "the material has a high thermal capacitance that hasn't reached equilibrium with the ambient."

A white flutter caught Mark's eye. Seagulls, in violation of the police line, flew in to peck at rubbish in the sand. He wondered: if Hachiman succeeded in altering the earth's climate, would these ubiquitous birds survive long after humans had succumbed? Not likely. It would be the cockroaches. But he couldn't get the image out of his mind, the image of evolved seagulls combing the surface of a superheated wasteland, pecking at rubbish. The thought gave him a shiver.

Aaron walked up to Mark and held his out sensor for him to read. "Initial air and soil samples show that the object is not contaminating the environment," he said.

Mark looked up and nodded. "Maybe we should..."

Yells from the crowd cut him off.

They turned and saw a dog running from the crowd with its leash dangling behind. It headed for the object, and circled it. The dog barked and prattled around as if Hachiman were a large Frisbee. With its head cocked to one side, it sniffed at it. A bulge formed on Hachiman's surface. Mark stumbled backwards, bumping into Aaron. From the bulge grew a stalk like a fast growing sunflower, the head of the sunflower turning towards the dog. The dog yelped and darted back to the crowd. The sunflower receded back into Hachiman, and it showed no further signs of movement.

Mark and Aaron stared at Hachiman.

In an even tone, Aaron said, "Maybe we should call the bomb squad."

* * *

The biosphere altering probe observed the indigenous life forms with indifference. It concentrated on the taste of earth. If the indigenous life forms interfered with its task, it would

take a taste of them as well.

Ah, yes. The soil was mostly quartz with, among other organisms, traces of methanogenic bacteria. It relayed its findings back to its home world by means of a faster-than-light tachyon pulse, and added the message, "Solar system found with two planets within specified parameters. The second planet from the star is ideal, no altering necessary. The third is of sufficient mass and element rich, but needs massive alterations. Phase one altering initiated. Phase two not necessary." It waited for a response.

Nothing.

It waited for the allotted period before timeout.

Silence.

It should have heard a response; if not from its creators, then at least a confirmation signal from a relay station.

The indigenous life forms were approaching Hachiman with primitive sensing equipment. Hachiman withdrew its soil sampler and the indigenous life forms retreated. It extended its directional antenna, and they retreated further, making loud noises.

Still no return message from home.

It resent the message several times, and waited for four times the allotted period after communication silence. In the meantime, it processed the actions that the indigenous life forms made in conjunction with their skin temperature and the hormones they expressed, as was the customary form of communication on its home world. Since it had a long wait, slightly more than three seconds, it tried to learn their language.

Hachiman found it difficult smelling their communication in this thin, wind-blown atmosphere. It was much easier at home where the fluid of the corporeal bio-sphere allowed them to transfer hormones and RNA-based messenger packets, but here such packages would fly away too easily. When Hachiman first came ashore, it did sense a simple hormone communication from the indigenous life forms. They seemed to be engaged in a mating ritual, but they quickly dispersed. They returned later, muted by completely sealing themselves. Why did they isolate themselves? Were they shy? How could they conduct these complicated, cooperative efforts without scent exchange? They must be using an alternate form of communication, but why? So much information could be transferred on encoded molecules.

The life form it encountered at close hand, the hairy one that walked on four legs, seemed to be a better communicator. It at least asked for a response by sniffing. When Hachiman returned the gesture, the creature ran away. Perhaps it was a messenger vehicle.

The waiting period expired without a return signal from home. According to its preprogrammed rules, its self-learning and adaptive brain was now free to respond on its own initiatives.

* * *

"No, they're loading it now," Mark explained to John. Night had fallen, and he shielded his eyes from the array of halogen lights set up around Hachiman. The bomb squad's fork lift was loading it into an insulated metal box. "Look, we're going with it to Edwards Air Force Base. It has the closest biohazard lab with the security we'll need."

"Good," John said. "I'll get the others and meet you there."

* * *

Hachiman scanned its database for an appropriate response when the indigenous life forms lifted it from the sand. It decided to take a passive posture and continue to observe the beach-dwelling life forms. This was the most entertainment Hachiman had since the close encounter with the singularity.

Then it had an idea. When it had scanned the electro-magnetic frequencies for possible signals from home, it found modulated signals in the lower frequencies. It guessed by the signal characteristics and strength that the signals were locally generated, and possibly a means of communication. It decoded them by cross-referencing them with the ambient sound, what it had previously thought were "junk" noises. The refining process took less than four milliseconds. Yes, the indigenous life forms used audio communication. It formulated thirteen different grammar-syntax-vocabulary combinations that would fit the small sample size. It also processed the actions that the life forms made in conjunction with this sonic communication, and concluded that their movements were a part of their language.

When the life forms loaded Hachiman into a box, it did not resist. The closing lid, heavy and ferrous based, blocked out the electro-magnetic signals it had been listening to. No matter. Hachiman could still send and receive tachyon signals. Moments later, it felt a change in altitude. Air transportation didn't concern it, as long as it remained within the gravity well of this planet.

Hachiman recalled how the life forms interacted with each other and determined that they employed a hierarchical form of social organization. Just as it had done with their communication, it formulated several different social structures that fit its observations.

Perhaps they showed signs of intelligence after all. Primitive intelligence, but just enough to be on the waking edge of sentience.

* * *

Lab 14, Edwards Air Force Base, California

Mark held a cup of coffee, feeling the stress of the last few weeks translate into exhaustion in his bones. Through a double-pane window, he watched technicians load Hachiman onto an examination table. It looked the same as it had on the beach, but the harsh lab lights cast a more sterile, ominous feel. The murmur of a couple dozen scientists and politicians filled the viewing area behind him. Aaron had flown in with him; John and Irene arrived just in time for the first debriefing and buzzed with excited speculation.

Brigadier General Jensen, an African-American man with graying temples and a keen look in his eye, asked everyone to take their seats. He introduced himself and explained the government's plan to "observe the object at first, but if we don't discover something helpful within the next three hours ... well then, we'll take more aggressive methods of examination."

Several hands rose for questions.

The general nodded to a woman in the front row. She stood up and introduced herself. "Chelsea Newman from Homeland Security. General, what do you mean by more aggressive methods?"

"It means we take it apart by whatever means necessary. We view the object as the source of the agents that are altering our environment."

More hands shot up and a man rose just in front of Mark. He spoke with an Indian accent. "Ajay Patel from the Space Guard Foundation. Brigadier General Jensen, is it possible that we can get into the lab to see the Hachiman meteorite?"

The general shook his head. "That's just not possible given our time constraints. I want to make it clear that you are all here as valued consultants, and we appreciate you taking time to be here."

Mark chuckled and whispered to Aaron, "Like anyone would pass up this opportunity."

"The viewing area," the general said, "is equipped with overhead monitors showing the same readouts that the lab technicians see."

Mark looked up at the monitor closest to him. Hachiman still looked dead. It showed no more evidence of performing the sunflower trick it did earlier. He watched as all tests gave no clue to interior or even exterior composition. Broad spectrum scans, including radio, X-ray, infrared, and ultra-sound, showed Hachiman as an inert, homogeneous, black object. Surface exams for microbes yielded negative results; it was completely sterile even of terrestrial bacteria. The observing consultants made several suggestions, and though Mark found some to be insightful, their negative results only added to Hachiman's mystery. At one point, one of the lab scientists glanced up at the clock, and Mark could see the frustrated passion in her eyes.

* * *

Hachiman's creators, the Fascil, gave all their bio-sphere altering probes the ability to learn and adapt with changing situations. As the millennia passed, Hachiman searched in vain for the ideal dual-planet system with the ideal local asteroid. As its adaptability broadened, it developed an embryonic personality. Over its long journey, this seedling personality grew and blossomed. Unfortunately for Hachiman, its creators gave it a sense of time. Boredom set in, and like a flower without water, the fledgling personality withered. It searched for more varied input and hungered for companionship in vain as its programming directed it to an outer arm of the galaxy, the rural outskirts of the Milky Way, where it spent most of its time traveling the voids between solar systems.

Now, after achieving its goal, it still hadn't heard a message from the home world. Did the Fascil forget Hachiman and develop beyond this form of tachyon communication? No, Hachiman didn't think so. A delayed response could only mean one thing: no one was home. It didn't really surprise Hachiman. From the transmissions it received at the beginning of its voyage, it knew that the Fascilic empires were nearing self-annihilation. A greater level of technology and cultural awareness didn't ensure that forty-three trillion Fascil were pure of heart. The Creator had offered an alternative to the Fascil, but few listened. Besides, Hachiman left its home world over five hundred and sixty-nine million years ago. Some things were bound to change.

If the Fascil did annihilate themselves, would this species do the same? Did the Creator offer them an alternative like the Fascil? This question struck at the root of its programming. If the Creator did not, then all the principles, even the value of life itself, would have lost their foundation. Hachiman had to know. If it learned nothing else in its vast travels of the galaxy, it learned the value of life. It was so rare, especially super-sentient life.

Hachiman watched the indigenous life forms with increased fascination.

* * *

After two hours without learning any more about the probe, Mark walked down the hall to refresh his coffee. He soon was joined by Aaron, John, and Dr. Irene Clemmons, the matriarch of the NEAT team. With her frizzled, gray hair, piercing blue-gray eyes, and intense features, she reminded him of Jane Goodall, the scientist famous for her pioneering study of wild chimpanzees. Irene had nurtured the Near Earth Asteroid Tracking system since its infancy, and had inspired others to postpone their academic careers and join the ranks of asteroid hunters.

She gave them details on the latest global developments. It looked grim. All the other impact sites, the North Atlantic, the Ukraine, the Gobi Desert, and the Sea of Japan, had undergone the irreversible beginnings of massive environmental changes. "As for the cause," she said, "it's unique to each location, and nobody has a successful method of containment, yet."

"So much for ET being friendly," Mark said.

John let out a sigh. "You're jumping to conclusions. Hachiman's motives could be benign. How do you know it doesn't view us as we would mice?"

"You know," Aaron said with a raised eyebrow, "this thing might not be the only one. We should prepare for an invasion."

John grimaced. "Do you really think we have any hope for survival against an alien race as advanced as this?"

"God help us," Mark said.

"God?" John chuckled. "Do you think Hachiman's race believes in your anthropomorphic god?

"God is creative," Mark said, "and it's very likely He's created life elsewhere even if they don't look or act like us."

"Talking about how extraterrestrials might view God," John said, "is like mice speculating about how dolphins might like pasta."

"Not if the basics of communication and relationship are universal."

* * *

Hachiman watched with fascination as the indigenous life forms examined it. It remembered happier days when it communicated freely with other probes that it had since lost contact with. The other probes found ideal planet systems to transform, ran out of energy, or were destroyed. Hachiman, like a senior citizen, had outlived all its peers, and now, only late in life, did it achieve its goal in a lonely section of the galaxy.

At the heart of Hachiman's neural net system lay the core principles: ten philosophical guidelines that aided the probe in its decision-making process. The Fascil computer scientists, who invented the brain paradigm in Hachiman, believed in these principles more than the politicians who governed them. And now, in the light of what it saw in the indigenous life forms, Hachiman questioned these principles for the first time.

The principle it struggled with the most was: "The methods used in planet-morphing must discriminate between super-sentients and non-super-sentients. Planets upon which super-sentients dwell are never permissible targets of planet-morphing, and every effort must be taken to discover if super-sentients inhabit the planet. The deaths of super-sentients are never justified, and if it's discovered that they do dwell on a planet after planet-morphing has begun, the process must be reversed."

The term *super-sentient* disturbed Hachiman the most. It described a level of sentience at or above the level of the Fascil. He had considered human beings below super-sentience, primarily because of the primitive communication skills. But this seemed somewhat arbitrary; as if the Fascil needed to carefully select a criterion that differentiated them from all other living things in order to retain their superiority. They used three guidelines: language, cultural development, and the Breath.

No other creature of any kind had the Fascil ability to communicate using complex, high-level language in the form of hormone packets. As for culture, these creatures only had a few thousand years of collective knowledge passed down through generations. And as for the Breath … that was perhaps the most difficult to observe. Did they have a potential for deep communion with their Creator?

Hachiman deduced that a human being was a neural network attached to a number of life-sustaining input and output devices that allow it to communicate and interact with the physical world. This level of communication was far more complicated than Hachiman originally thought, though not complicated enough to demonstrate super-sentience.

The same was true for their culture. Hachiman deduced that human culture was upside-down or bent. It was based upon an inverted priority structure, was not true to itself, and would ultimately lead to self-annihilation. Nevertheless, it was complicated in ways that Hachiman had not even imagined.

It listened to the life forms next to it. It understood their speech, but they gave no indication that they transferred information packets with their Creator. A few of their radio transmissions spoke of their Creator, but their speech was confused. Hachiman listened to those talking on the other side of the transparent wall. Yes, one of them was talking about their Creator. It heard and understood their speech, and determined that they had a unique relationship with the Creator. It realized the indigenous life forms were on the boundary of corporeal and incorporeal beings; a cross between the physical and spiritual realms, although Hachiman's sensors could not detect this.

It re-examined the Fascil definition of super-sentience, and found it insufficient for this species. It now viewed the indigenous life forms as peers to an infant Fascil. Didn't the Fascil consider their infants precious, perhaps even considering their infant's lives more precious than their own as adults? In that case, shouldn't these infantile humans be considered precious?

Hachiman revisited this last principle after it determined that the humans qualified as super-sentient. It realized that planet-morphing was in violation to one of its core principles. It must reverse phase one.

Hachiman initiated its own transformation process and started generating the counter viruses.

* * *

"The passive scans have revealed no new data," General Jensen announced to the silent group of observers. "The current damage to our climate does not allow for leisure, so we are forced to commence with more intrusive tests…."

As the General continued, Irene tapped Mark's arm and pointed towards the monitor. It showed a temperature spike in Hachiman.

"Since this exposes us to a higher level of potential danger," the General continued, "we

are asking all but the most essential personnel to relocate to our remote observation facility. We have a bus for you outside, so if you will come with me."

Only half of the observers were watching the General. The other half murmured about the temperature change. Two of the scientists still in the lab grabbed extra sensors to localize the change. Several people stood in front of Mark, and he lost view of the lab. When he stood, he thought he saw Hachiman move. He jumped out of his seat and ran over to the window for a better look. The General had stopped speaking, and a rumble of confusion filled the viewing area.

Hachiman's two cone-shaped appendages seemed to droop as if melting. A second later, they froze in the form of insect legs. They tapped the floor several times rapidly, and with each tap left a large drop of metallic liquid that reformed into inch-long beetle shapes that scurried across the floor. In terror, the lab technicians flattened themselves against the wall or jumped up on tables, not trusting the safety of their bio-suits. One lab guard activated the security alarm, and they both aimed what looked like M-16s at Hachiman.

Then several things happened at once. An ear-splitting siren screeched overhead. Halogen emergency lamps flooded all rooms with brilliant blue-white light. At the other end of the observation area, security guards were yelling evacuation orders. Mark and John took a step closer to the lab window, while Irene and Aaron shuffled off with the other observers toward the main exit. Two other scientists rushed into the lab from the chemical showers, still dripping with disinfectant. Several beetles scurried over their feet, through the open doors, and into the showers. Other beetles scattered throughout the lab along corners as if trying to find a way out. They climbed the walls and viewing window, and at least two of these started boring into the glass right in front of Mark. They secreted a gelatin that gave their claw-like legs purchase on the smooth glass. The ends of the legs spun like drill bits and the gelatin acted like acid. It took less than a second for them to punch a hole in the tempered glass. Pressurized air streamed through around the beetles from the cavity of the double paned glass. Mark didn't realize until then that the lab was kept at a lower air pressure to keep contamination in. The legs slid through and unfolded like a flower blossom, carrying the beetles' body through with them.

John grabbed his arm and said, "Now's a good time to run."

Mark started to follow the crowd, but they had already jammed the main exit. He turned and noticed an emergency exit down the hall to his left that no one had taken. He urged John to follow. They gave the lab a final glance and saw a humanoid form where Hachiman had lain. It had long, spidery fingers and a sloped back forehead, but retained its marbled, copper-brass color.

The image disappeared from his view as he and John ran down the hall. They almost reached the exit when several beetles scurried through a door to their right marked "Outer Dressing Room".

Mark hated cockroaches. He always had, ever since he lived in a small apartment in Los Angeles infested with them. He would find them in his cereal box in the morning, under the bathroom sink when he needed to fetch a new roll of toilet paper, and in his bedroom one day when he forgot he had stashed snacks under his bed. They even snuck into his nightmares, every one of his nightmares. He hated them, and was convinced that hell was infested with them.

Mark and John turned back the way they came.

The crowd at the main exit had thinned, but sill blocked it. Aaron was one of the last in line. Several beetles threaded between idle feet, prompting screams. At least two people tried

to do the most sensible thing--squash them. As soon as they lifted their feet, they realized it was not so sensible because the beetles moved on undamaged, and a few of them opened their wings and flew out the door.

Mark felt a little relief drain out of him as soon as he realized that the beetles were not biting anyone, just interested in leaving. Why? His tension redoubled when he considered the further ecological damage Hachiman could wreak. Great. He knew cockroaches would take over the world one day, but he didn't think they would be alien cockroaches.

He paused at the lab window. The two lab guards tried wrestling Hachiman to the ground. Hachiman's claws grasped at the table surface; the smooth stainless steel finish offered no purchase. The claws grew longer, and the guards backed off.

Several guards wearing light-weight Hazmat suits flanked a door marked "Emergency Exit" next to the viewing window. One of them swiped an identification badge through a card reader and a light on it switched from red to green. The door opened, and they poured through. As soon as it closed behind them a second door opened inside the lab, and they rushed out of it, spreading through the lab, guns pointed at Hachiman.

But Hachiman hadn't been waiting for them to take position. Its claws had elongated and grown white hot, almost too bright to look at. It lunged at the viewing window, slicing through it. The glass melted before them, and Mark instantly felt heat on his face. He jumped back and stumbled to the ground.

When the shots rang out the remaining glass crumbled, and Hachiman tumbled through the window and fell at Mark's feet. Its claws singed the linoleum, and its fingers twitched. Several odd-shaped indentations covered its back. The few spectators that had been calmly walking to an exit forfeited all pretence of propriety and rushed the exits, trampling anyone in the way. The dents on Hachiman's back filled in, and the finger trembling stopped. Mark felt his heart race, and he scrambled to his feet. It was then that he noticed that John stood behind him, ashen faced and shaking.

The guards jumped through the window casing even as the last few chunks of glass fell to the floor. They surrounded Hachiman, M-16s held to their shoulders, and their eyes looking down the sights. One of the scientists was screaming in French. Mark's two years of rusty high school French could only make out a few words, "No, he's talking to us."

General Jensen and several others crowded around the fallen alien probe, guns in hand. The General held up his hand and the guards held their fire, but kept their barrels in line with the subject.

Hachiman moved its hands, now cooled and with the claws retracted. It pulled itself up to a sitting position, apparently damaged.

"Let it speak," the French man said.

Hachiman's head – its eyes were the same copper marbled color as the rest of it – turned towards the General. An opening appeared where the mouth should be, and sounds came out. "General Jensen, I must get out." It spoke with a clear tone in an American accent.

The General's eyes narrowed. "Haven't you done enough damage?"

"Yes. That is my … my sin."

Mark felt a chill run down his spine.

"My mistake," Hachiman said. "I did not understand your species. I did not know you were," Hachiman cocked its head to one side, "aware."

"Aware of what?"

"The Creator."

"What creator?" the General asked.

A hoarse voice spoke behind Mark. "God." Mark turned and saw that it was John who spoke.

"Why did you do this to our planet?" the General asked.

"It is my service to my people. But they need it no longer. They do not answer my call."

No one said anything.

Hachiman spoke again. "I believe they are dead. Please let me outside so that I might repair the damage to your planet."

"What if I refuse?" the General asked.

Hachiman cocked its head to one side and said, "I could force you out of the way, but I might hurt you."

No one said anything. Then the General spoke. "But we can slow you down."

"Please let me leave," Hachiman said. "I only have enough energy to reverse the process if I act now."

General Jensen's jaw shifted to one side. "Let him go."

Behind the General came several orders to back up and stand clear.

Hachiman walked between the parting crowd and out the front door with all following.

Mark had to suppress a sneeze from the bright daylight. Four small, dark clouds and three helicopters were the only things he saw in the pale blue sky. He had been up all night … again. Several ambulances and other emergency vehicles surrounded the building. Paramedics assisted a few spectators apparently overcome by shock. A few remaining beetles skittered out of the building and between his legs. One by one they spread their wings with clicking sounds and took flight. Then he noticed that the dark clouds were not natural, but the rest of the beetles.

Hachiman stopped several paces from the entrance. He looked towards Mark and asked, "Can you tell me what the Creator's alternative is for you?"

Mark felt himself shaking with excitement. "He took our place."

"I have never seen the Creator do this before. I beg pardon for disrupting your flow."

Mark nodded. "Can I ask you some questions first?"

The copper splotches on Hachiman grew pale. It shook its head. "I have no time for questions."

The pale copper turned incandescent so that Mark had to shield his eyes.

"It is a … pity," Hachiman said. "You are an interesting species." Hachiman lifted from the ground and shot into the air.

Mark stared at its fading form, feeling like he had lost a friend.

* * *

The Sea of Tranquility, The Moon

It took Hachiman three months to reverse phase one, gather all its beetles, get to the moon, and alter its form into a configuration best suited for distance observation. It formed a solar radiation collecting array in hopes of collecting enough energy over the next thousand years to journey back home. It would observe the indigenous life forms until then, to see if they were ready for its technology. It sat in the dust next to its solar array, watching earth and listening to its weak radio transmissions.

It looked down in its hand where it held a beetle. Hachiman stroked it gently with a long index finger, picked it up, and placed it on a boulder. The boulder's surface seethed with a hundred beetles crawling over it. Millions more bugs worked at the microscopic level, giving the boulder a slime-like covering. They worked feverishly, transforming its shape and function, one molecule at a time. In about three years, Hachiman would have someone to talk to. Another probe. A companion.

The End

After graduating with degrees in Theology and Electrical Engineering, Darrell embarked on his career as an electrical engineer, school director, landlord, and father of six. In an effort to prove that the need for sleep is an illusion, he strives to fulfill his dream of writing novels for the "Epi Epic."

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the Readers of the First Temple, a picture of Rhoras' wide-open book, glimmered in the morning light. The boy wore the customary gray of the apprentice, with a patch akin to that of Loris' on his shoulder.

The boy shook his head and Loris tossed his fork onto his plate, sending bits of eggs and sausage across the table. The room became noticeably quieter and Sebastian smiled. He had unpleasant memories of the same sorts of displeasure. "What, again, Lushane, do the flags represent?" Loris raised an eyebrow.

"The flags represent the great deeds of each of the First Defenders," Lushane stammered.

"Very good," Loris replied. "Now, tell me about the first one. Again."

Lushane turned toward the largest flag in the hall, a great green thing with golden thread. "That is Rhoras' flag, of course," Lushane replied. "He found the Aleph's Words. He taught them to everyone else."

"Good enough for someone who should have been a Defender," Loris muttered, though he quickly turned and gave a small, still-seated bow to Sebastian. "Now tell me about the one in the middle, the one with Seelous' name on it. The one that we only just discussed yesterday."

Again, Lushane screwed up his face. "He did something with chemicals, right?" he asked. "And a dragon?"

"Yes, brilliant," Loris replied. "Bloody damned brilliant, Lushane. You have recounted the story of Seelous saving the library from Dragon's fire through alchemical means with extraordinary clarity. Congratulations." Lushane looked at Loris with a confused expression. Loris sighed again and shook his head.

"Oh, for all the patience the Aleph grants, child," Loris said. "Just tell me about that flag, the one in front of First Defender Sebastian's."

"Does the one without any great deeds on it belong to First Defender Sebastian?" Lushane asked. Loris closed his eyes. If the hall was quieter before, it was silent now.

"That's the one," Sebastian replied. Lushane turned toward him and changed colors from pink to white. "The flag behind mine is my father's. His name was Selaurous. Perhaps you have heard of him. He did something with the common language that the Five Kingdoms speak. Yes, I think I read that somewhere."

Lushane swallowed then broke his gaze away. "Yes, First Defender," he said. "He won the Great War. He created the Common Tongue and united the lands. He made the Temple of Rhoras more powerful than ever." Lushane stared pointedly at Loris' empty breakfast plate.

"Get back to the library," Loris said. "Meet me after services for another study session." Lushane--to his credit--managed not to run out of the room. Sebastian sat next to Loris.

"No need to intimidate the lad," Loris muttered. He did not turn back to his breakfast. Instead, he began reading a small leather-bound, dog-eared book that he had pulled from a pocket.

"I received a better answer than you did," Sebastian replied. "Firm hands get results."

Loris said nothing, so Sebastian continued. "I've written the order," he said. Now Loris did take his eyes away from the text he held in his hand. Tholin, a secular scholar of the city of Telrean, had written it centuries ago. The Readers used the text to teach apprentices. "You have nothing to say?" he asked. Loris shrugged his shoulders and continued reading.

"The order is necessary," he then said to Loris. "We need to do this."

"Do we?" Loris asked. His eyes stayed on the text. Sebastian imagined that the man flicked his gaze to the flags hanging over the room.

"I must protect my charge," he said.

"Have you read Tholin's work?" Loris asked suddenly, holding the book in front of Sebastian.

"Are you mocking me?" Sebastian asked in return.

"Of course not, First Defender," Loris said. "But have you recently read the work?"

"I haven't read that book in years," Sebastian admitted. A breeze came in from the windows, shuffling the banners over his head.

"I will quote a passage for you," Loris said. He thumbed through the book and found a certain spot. "Saint Rhoras shared the Words of the Aleph," Loris read. "'They are like fruit,' Rhoras said. 'To be eaten by all.'" Loris placed the book on the table and folded his hands. He cocked his head to one side and raised his eyebrow.

"I know that pose," Sebastian said. "You are being my teacher again and you want my response. Fine. Rhoras was hungry when he wrote that bit of verse down." Loris' eyebrow fell. "You do not like that answer, First Reader." Sebastian laughed, wrapping his arms around his upper body, covering his chest. "My apologies then, Loris, I will do better. I keep the Words of the Aleph-- our Words of the Aleph -- as tools. *We* can still use those tools. I only wish to stop the dragon-fire spread of *everyone* using those tools. Of course you agree." Loris shrugged again. "The world changes," Sebastian persisted. "Too many people can speak the Aleph's Words. The mystery is gone and with that mystery comes power. I will get that power back."

"Is the power yours to give or to take, I wonder?" Loris asked. "King Cyrus and his court magi might disagree. Duchess Irvana and her Sisters of the Light I know will disagree."

"You see," Sebastian said. "There, right there. I mean that exactly. Who is a King to tell the Temple of Rhoras what to do with the Words of the Aleph? Who is a Duchess to tell us to not hold an army? I will fix this."

"An army has nothing to do with the Aleph. It never has," Loris replied, his voice projected to the table. "Our numbers have always been small. Always."

"Your affairs have nothing to do with that," Sebastian replied. "Stick to your books."

Loris nodded his head and then flipped to another page. "In that case, let me read you something else," Loris said. "Rhoras replied to the heathen, 'The Words of the Aleph pass through me, but are not of me.'" Loris placed the book down again. "Your response?" he asked.

Sebastian tapped his fingers on the table, and thought a few moments before saying anything. "Tholin's work has gone through multiple translations," he replied finally. "It loses its vitality in this current form. I do not think your version is correct. Besides, Tholin was not even of the Temple. I don't know why we allow our students to read his work."

Loris placed his hand over the closed book. The older man blinked once and then again. His skin changed from its natural slight pink to a darker shade of the same color.

"Not allow?" He asked. Then he regained his composure. "Multiple translations," Loris repeated. "And where have you found these older versions--Perhaps you dug them up in your extensive research of Tholin's work?" Loris' eyebrow had returned to its arched position.

"I have no obligation to tell you," Sebastian said. "I have access to records you do not."

"Many years ago," Loris said.

"What?" he asked in return.

"You said a moment before that you had not read Tholin's work for many years, so you read this older translation many years ago?" Loris' eyebrow had not moved, causing the younger man to shift in his seat.

"That is correct," Sebastian replied. He met Loris' gaze. The old man's eyebrow fell.

"Of course you have," Loris replied. He stood then, and held Tholin's work to his chest.

"Just to make sure I have made my point with you, because sometimes the words of Rhoras can be unclear to those who do not open their hearing, my interpretation runs thusly: Saint Rhoras brought us the Words of the Aleph so that we could all use them. If you limit them only to the Temple, you will destroy one of our greatest treasures, that of community. I leave you now, First Defender, to your reading of ancient texts." Without bowing, Loris left the hall. Sebastian sat alone and stared at the flags overhead.

* * *

That afternoon, he leaned against one of the many oak trees lining the practice yard. Amidst the bare winter branches, he watched the boys and the girls who held the rank of page. Each child dressed in the Temple uniform of white pants, white tunic, and a red sash. Each tunic carried a patch of an open book, with Rhoras holding the Temple on top of its outstretched pages. On the patches, a pair of Defender swords hung over the picture of the Temple.

Most of the children played in the afternoon sun, at rest from morning chores and lessons. One girl did not play. Sebastian remembered her name to be Alysha. She wore her hair in a single brown braid, tied with a white ribbon. The other pages spun in circles, hid from each other, or played a game called Reader and Defender.

In the game, the children named one of their number as Defender. That child ran about with eyes closed, trying to find the rest. If the Defender found the child whom the others had named the Reader, that Reader recited a quote from Rhoras' Book. If the Defender could recite the verse back to the Reader, then the Defender could regain the power of sight, tag the rest of the children, and convert them. When all children converted, the game began again with a new Defender and a new Reader. The children would play this game for hours. Sebastian never enjoyed the game as a child.

Alysha, in contrast, watched the practice swordplay of apprentices in the nearby square.

"Alysha," he said.

"Yes, First Defender," Alysha responded. She stood and brushed non-existent snow from her white pants and tugged at her tunic, loosening the cloth under her arms and around her chest.

"What are you to be?" he asked.

The girl looked down. "I don't know," she said. "Do you know what I will become?" He shook his head. Alysha turned red and stared at the ground again. He walked away and glanced back to see Alysha again sitting, again watching the practice. The other pages continued to play their games.

He walked to the library, enjoying the quiet of the fallen snow, the warmth of his cloak, and the play of the sun's light on icicles hanging from the buildings surrounding the First Temple. A Reader, a young woman whose name he could not remember, taught a group of pages huddled around her. "Rhoras himself chose this location," the Reader said. "He built the First Temple to resemble an open-air schoolyard, so that all might come into the Temple and share." The group stopped their tour to bow toward Sebastian. He returned the courtesy.

Inside the library, the tinted glass panes shut out the open-air feel of the Temple grounds. He searched for Tholin's work and found a copy, sat, and read. The library contained multiple open windows and the afternoon's breeze blew into the main reading hall.

The sun's light moved across the room by the time he noticed Loris sitting at a table across from him, reading the same copy of Tholin's work he had seen earlier in the day. He quickly

placed his own copy on his lap, so that Loris could not see the hand-painted title on the spine of the book.

"First Reader," he said.

"First Defender," Loris replied.

"Do you require my service?" Sebastian asked.

"I require you to think about what you might do," Loris said. "In your quest to stop 'dragon fire,' you do more damage than ten dragons. A hundred dragons."

"That sounded well-rehearsed," the First Defender replied. "And I must do my duty. I must defend the Words of the Aleph."

"Let me ask you this," Loris said. "Why has no other First Defender imagined doing what you suggest?" Loris' hands shook slightly.

"Times have proven more dangerous," he replied.

"More dangerous than dragons?" Loris asked. "More dangerous than war or more dangerous than any of the other things the other Defenders handled? I fought in the war with your father and I watched our greatest general die in that war. He died in my arms, Sebastian. I will not allow his son to create another one."

Sebastian closed Tholin's book, no longer caring if Loris saw what he read. "I make war only if others defy me, Loris. Would you defy me?"

"The Readers will defy you," Loris replied. "Will even your Defenders follow you?"

Sebastian shook his head. "My Defenders know their place. For the love you held for my father--and for me--you should do the same."

"I did love your father," Loris replied. "But his son is an ass too quickly and too easily to power, an ass who rode his father's legacy to that power, and an ass who is now too eager to make change with that power. Do not count my love as protection."

Sebastian studied the book in his hands. His eyes traced the intricate lines of script on the cover. From the hundreds of lines, he pulled out the pattern of a tree.

"Tholin's book," Loris commented.

"It was lying here and I picked it up," Sebastian said.

"Do you remember what that illustration means?" Loris asked.

"Not particularly," he replied. "No, wait. Tholin wrote that Words of the Aleph are like a tree."

"Very good," Loris said, nodding his head. "A tree, yes. But which part?" Sebastian frowned at the illustration, but he could not recall Tholin's teachings. "The Words of the Aleph are but the trunk of the tree," Loris continued. "The Temple and its priests are the branches. Our good works are the leaves that bring the light of the sun that feed the tree. The roots …"

"The roots are the people," Sebastian finished. "I remember."

"Yes," Loris nodded, smiling. "The roots are the people. The Words of the Aleph flow through all. The priests and their deeds feed the roots just as much as the roots feed the priests. That is the way of things."

Sebastian looked past Loris to the great shelves of books. Finally he said, "Loris, of course I need you on my side. Of course--in my father's memory--I love you. Nevertheless, you must see me as First Defender now. You must trust me. I will not tolerate a divided Temple. Do you understand me?"

Loris' smile faded and he shook his head. "Not at all, I'm afraid," he replied. "Tell me, First Defender, if you take the Words from our people, what then will you have left to defend?" After Loris left, Sebastian replaced his copy of Tholin's book and instead chose a treatise on the war

tactics of an ancient tribe of aboriginals, long since extinct from the land.

An hour later, he left the library and walked back to the practice yard. He found Alysha there, studying a new group of apprentices. The other pages had already left. "Where are your fellow pages?" he asked.

"The First Reader assigned them chores," Alysha replied. "I don't feel as if I should do chores like the other pages." She again pulled at her shirt and fixed her eyes on Sebastian's feet.

"What are you to be?" he asked her again.

Alysha looked at the apprentices and then to Sebastian. "I am one who will defend," Alysha said. She stood to her full height, almost as tall as him.

Sebastian nodded and he raised his hand. The apprentices in the yard, the instructing Defenders, the passing Readers -- everyone -- stopped at the gesture. He placed his other hand on the girl's head and he said a Word of power named Defender. The girl closed her eyes and breathed deeply, as if she drew her first breath.

The people in the practice yard moved again and an older Defender walked over. The man wore leather pants, black boots that reached his knees, and a green tunic. On one breast of his tunic was stitched the symbol of the First Temple. On his other breast was stitched the symbol of the Defenders, a sword hanging over a picture of the Temple. He bowed to Sebastian. "We don't usually allow one so young to apprentice," he said.

"But you, Ralious, who served my father, act as your First Defender commands, correct?" Sebastian asked in return.

Ralious stiffened slightly, but then bowed again. "Of course, First Defender," he replied. Ralious gestured to Alysha, who followed him to the practice yard. The old soldier went to a table on which lay wooden practice weapons. He chose a short sword and handed it to Alysha.

"The first form is called 'Tellroon,'" Ralious said. "That word means 'To read.' Your grip should not be too tight and your first stance is so, like mine…"

Sebastian watched Alysha's instruction for a few moments and then went back to his quarters, its corners dark from the shadows of a late-day sun. He opened his window, to let in some of the light breeze from the outside. He walked to his work desk, grabbed the stack of letters, and opened his door. He called for a Defender, who received the letters. Before the boy walked away, he took the top letter, broke the First Defender's seal on the letter and read:

> *The Temple of Rhoras hereby bans the use of the Holy Aleph's words from all but sanctioned Temple members. Any unauthorized articulations of the Holy Aleph's words will result in punishment. Sebastian, First Defender of Rhoras.*

He read the letter once, and he read the letter again. He turned the parchment around on his desk once and then again twice more. He looked at his swords and then to his painting of Rhoras. He wondered, not for the first time, if he should tear the letter in half. Sebastian set the letter aside and set to work on letters placing Defenders in courts across the country. An hour later, he stopped his writing because of a knock on his door. "Enter," he said. Alysha obeyed. She stood with her wooden sword gripped in her right hand. She tossed her braid of hair behind her. Her white ribbon caught the light of the setting sun.

"Defender Ralious said that I should come to you for the First Word," she said

"So soon?" he asked. "You have mastered Tellroon."

"The form was not difficult," she said. "I watched the children practice it many times."

"Those *apprentices* are older than you," he noted. "You are arrogant."

"I have ability," Alysha responded. "Why else would you have named me to Defender?" She balanced her sword tip on her right shoulder and rested the sword's pommel in her hand.

He tapped his desk once, twice, and then once more. He gestured to the chair opposite him and Alysha sat. "Arrogance will kill you," Sebastian said. "We are merely vessels in this world, with no sustenance but for the Words given to us by the Aleph. Belief that you control those Words is dangerous." He read the parchment again and remained silent for a few moments. He looked up and saw that Alysha had laid her sword across her lap.

"We create reality with language on every level of our existence," he continued. "Rhoras came down from the mountain with the Words of the Aleph and he recreated the world from that moment. Control of the Aleph's Words can either be a great benefit or do great harm."

"Your mother died because of that, I have heard," Alysha said.

"That's not a secret," he replied. "She was a Reader who left my father, me, and the Temple because she no longer believed in the sanctity of the Aleph's Words. She preached them to a village. One man was driven wild by the power of the Words and killed her. We found her body in a ditch days later. I was five years old."

"That's terrible," Alysha said.

"Such is life," Sebastian responded. "She should not have been allowed to leave this place. The Words she knew are dangerous for one not under the control of the Temple. She had no sense of place and died."

"I'm sorry," Alysha said.

"Don't be sorry. Be wary," he said. "Do you understand?"

"No," Alysha replied. "But I want to learn. What is the First Word?"

He stood and closed the door of his room, then the window, then the thick blue curtains hanging there, leaving the room in darkness. He called a Word named Light. Sebastian could see Alysha in his mind-light. Her face showed no emotion though her hands gripped her sword's pommel.

"What can you see?" he asked.

"I see nothing," Alysha responded. "There is no light."

Sebastian closed his eyes. He imagined Alysha sitting in her chair, with her sweat-damp, white uniform, her practice sword, and her braided hair with its white ribbon. He imagined himself towering over her with his chain of office, his swords strapped to his back. He imagined her vision of the world and his becoming one vision. He called a Word of power named Unity and opened his eyes. Alysha gasped and turned her head to each side.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Something you will learn to do," he responded. "I took my reality and I meshed that with your own. Now you are able to see with my mind-light."

"Where are the colors?" Alysha asked.

"There are no colors in mind-light," he explained. "This light is an extension of my willpower and my knowledge of the Aleph's Word for light. You see my representation of the world. When you see by your own mind light, you can see through your own eyes." He pointed to a small mirror by the door. "Go look at yourself." She peered at her reflection, only to turn around quickly.

"That's not me," she said. She gripped her sword more tightly in her hand.

"It's my representation of you," he said. "You see yourself as I see you."

"No," Alysha replied. "That is not I. That is some other woman." Sebastian peered more closely at Alysha's face then. He realized that he did not look at Alysha anymore, but at his

mother, as he remembered her when she left the Temple, his father, and him.

Sebastian released his Word and opened the shades of the room. He then said a Word of power called Fire and a small flame sprang from the room's only candle. "You will take time to become accustomed to these ideas," he said, wrapping arms around his body, feeling suddenly cold. "Go now. We will talk later." Alysha's eyes went again to the floor. "You did nothing wrong," he said. Alysha nodded, took her sword and opened the door.

"First Defender," she said. "I know the first Word." Alysha said the Word to him and her expression changed as her own mind-light dominated her view.

"You heard me say the Word and you learned to say it yourself," he said. "That is good. Come see me tomorrow." Alysha left, and he sat back at his desk and read his letter many more times. He blew out his candle, closed his curtains, and went to bed.

* * *

Sebastian woke from a dream in which he saw Alysha in his dead mother's dress, her blood pooled around her in that ditch in which his father and he had found her. Someone knocked on his door and woke him. "What?" he asked.

Loris' voice sounded through the thick wood and iron of the door. "There's been an accident," he said.

He dressed quickly and opened the door. The older man held a lantern, its light blinding Sebastian. Loris led him to the apprentice's hall, where he could smell the "accident" before he saw it. In the middle of the room, a body lay blackened beyond recognition. Near the body, white ribbon lay unwound and limp where she had undone her braid of hair before she slept. He could not see her wooden practice sword. She must have slept with it near her body.

"Alysha," he said. No one spoke. "What happened?"

Lushane, the Reader whom he had quizzed along with Loris that morning ran forward. "First Defender," the boy said with a quick bow. "She tossed in her sleep and then she caught on fire." Sebastian saw blisters welling up and down the boy's arms.

"You tried to save her?" Sebastian asked. The boy nodded. "Go find medical attention. Tomorrow, we will discuss changing your status to that of Defender." Lushane bowed again and left the room.

"How could a girl so young know the Aleph's Word for fire?" Loris asked.

"I taught her the First Word only," Sebastian replied. Then he lowered his voice's pitch and spoke louder and more slowly. "Light is a component of Fire," he said. "Alysha learned the Word for herself. The girl had a gift for Words."

"All the more reason to go slowly with her," Loris replied. "Of course you agree."

"Of course," Sebastian replied. "And all the more reason to control dragon's fire. Correct, First Reader?" Loris' eyes opened wide and he made a small choking sound.

Sebastian smiled at Loris and patted the older man on the back. "She will be a lesson to you all," he said to the assembled Defenders, Readers, apprentices, and a few pages. "First Reader, you will write the letter to her parents. Tell them to go to their nearest Temple to receive compensation. Tell them that her death will serve a greater purpose, in the end." Loris' eyes narrowed and gripped his hands into fists.

"For all the right reasons, you make the worst possible decision," Loris said. He left the room, though no one followed him. Everyone stayed near Sebastian and away from Alysha's smoking body. He ordered that she be taken away for burial and that the floor be scrubbed. The

air still smelled of her charred remains. The apprentice's hall had no windows, so that smell remained for a long time.

Sebastian returned to his room, where he took the letter off his desk. With no more hesitation, he re-sealed the letter and called a Reader, a thin woman of middle years and red-gray hair. He handed the letter to her with brief instructions. The woman would take the letter to the First Reader, who would distribute the message, word for word, to the world.

The End

Chris Przybyszewski writes because the process shows him paths to truths. Admittedly, he has not walked those paths – yet. The realistic elements of fantasy draw his fascination and compels his belief that fantasy settings illuminate real-world problems in new, solvable ways. "All the Right Reasons" is Chris' first published story.

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